

Hunter 541

Chapter 541 - Angry Shark, Doo Doo Doo Doo Doo

When fighting a larger foe, one had to always make use of that against them. The shark's size made it far stronger in direct clashes, but Jake's smaller size offered him more mobility and allowed him to make his way around the shark and be more maneuverable.

Not that the shark was slow. It did not only use its body but its magic to move in unpredictable ways. Jake had to constantly adapt as the entire body of the beast was its weapon, teeth-like scales protruding from its skin, all angled to cut him simply by brushing against the body of the beast. This meant that Jake had to constantly back away and make sure only his weapons touched his opponent. To make matters worse, then the Razorstream part of the shark's name was not a joke. The currents of water around the shark cut him like it was filled with tiny razorblades, putting a constant strain on his Scales of the Malefic Viper.

The passive barrier from Arcane Awakening also helped – a skill he had been forced to use right off the bat to just put up a fight. Fully activated, too, as his body was flushed with power and every attack dealt a bit more arcane damage, and the passive shield took off a bit of the power from the razor-like water.

Jake clashed with the beast several times as he was slowly forced back, sim-Jake always at the back of his mind. As if Jake had two minds, they both analyzed their opponent on the fly and adapted their strategy. Fangs of the Malefic Viper made sure every stab included a good dose of poison, and his Hunting Momentum was slowly building up, but the Razorstream made it, so he constantly took damage, and he was hit all the time as the moment-by-moment fight had him the back back foot.

Fighting in water was just a lot harder, and even if he could use his wings to maneuver better than a human normally would, it was still far worse than what a creature naturally operating underwater could do. All of his attacks were weakened, too, as he always had to fight against the water to do anything. However, even so, Jake did not feel any true mortal danger because he always had one thing he could do to end the fight right there and then.

Retreating. Jake could easily get away at any point unless the shark wanted to chase him above water, in which case Jake would happily fight it up there. He was convinced the shark could fight above water if it so desired, and he could make the battle far easier by simply flying up a few kilometers, but he wanted this fight. Sim-Jake wanted this fight.

Jake was forced back by a powerful torrent of cutting water as his scales and arcane barrier both clattered from the thousands of small cuts. His armor was slowly getting torn to shreds, but in return, he managed to land a hit here and there.

Cuts from Jake's katars quickly proved ineffective as the natural armor offered by the teeth-like skin proved highly resistant, meaning only stabbing would work. And katars were really good at stabbing things, so it worked out.

A large summoned maw of teeth tried to close around Jake's leg as he barely managed to avoid it and charge towards the shark. It whipped its body around to smash him with its tail and push him away, but Jake had seen that move before. He ducked under the tail and stabilized himself to not get caught up in the resulting wave of pressure from the water. He then rapidly dove forward and stabbed the backside of the shark with Eternal Hunger before it could once more blast him with a wave of water magic.

Jake tried to summon mana strings to bind or restrain the massive C-grade, but the teeth on its skin moved and tore off whatever he used. Moreover, it began to release these teeth out of its skin like projectiles, each of them far more powerful than the magically summoned teeth in the water.

Both of them quickly seemed to realize that finishing the other off quickly was not an option as the shark dedicated its focus to whittling Jake down as Jake slowly wounded and poisoned the shark. The hemotoxin poison he used made the beast bleed even more than it should and colored the entire area of their fight red with blood. Not that the shark seemed overly bothered even after hundreds of liters had been drained. Its Vitality was above expectations. However, he also noticed one other important thing.

While Jake was not confident fighting underwater, the shark wasn't confident fighting someone Jake's size either. Something that had quickly become clear upon diving beneath the waves was that the scale of most creatures down there exceeded that of the land dwellers. Chances are, the only creatures that were small were weaklings that the shark could simply swat away or eat in a single gulp, making it completely unaccustomed to someone his size.

They both needed to adapt and overcome the holes in their fighting styles, and in this department, there was no competition.

Jake once more dodged a tail-swipe as he landed a small stab on the base of the tail. The beast rolled around to try and cut him like a meatgrinder, but Jake had already teleported back and pulled out his bow. A single Arcane Powershot was rapidly charged, blowing off many of the teeth acting as the shark's armor and leaving a nasty wound. The beast knew it could not allow him to attack uninterrupted and conjured several ranged attacks to stop him.

Shooting off one more arrow, Jake made it split and explode as a cascade of blasts rocked the water and hid Jake from the shark's sight. Jake took this chance to land another Arcane Powershot before the beast could locate him.

With speed surpassing anything prior, the shark was upon him as the sphere of cutting current around it expanded and grew in power. Jake responded in kind as Pride of the Malefic Viper flared to life, and Jake infused arcane energy into his surroundings to faintly stabilize it.

Resource-wise, Jake was nearly on par with a C-grade, at least when it came to mana. He directly engaged in a battle of environmental control with the shark as he met it in melee once more. Jake had a good few exchanges, and it had allowed him to build some Hunting Momentum, but it was not time yet to use it.

The two of them clashed several more times, both taking damage, with Jake being slowly pushed back by the larger foe. While he was building up for something, he knew the shark was too. However, as things were, he would gladly take advantage of learning some of his foe's patterns.

An attack he had seen many times before was used. It was one where the shark tried to smash him with the side of its body to then follow up with a quick spin and a tail-swipe, with the spin actually just a feint. Jake allowed himself to be hit, even if he could have easily avoided it, and used the momentum from the blow to get shot a bit deeper into the water.

Already having committed to the move, the shark was not fast enough to react as Jake used One Step Mile and appeared right beneath its belly. With one hand, he stabbed Eternal Hunger into its body, and with the other, he stabbed once to break the teeth armor. In a fluid motion, Jake dismissed the katar on that hand and punched forward again, penetrating the wound he had just made with his hand.

He felt the muscles of the shark close around it, and his arm got stuck. Jake gritted his teeth as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, and toxic energy was pumped directly into the guts of the beast. At the same time, Jake took control of the hemotoxin energy within it and forced it towards its heart. He had already thoroughly scanned and understood its physiology and where to hit. All of this was simply a setup for the final blow.

Realizing that Jake was doing far more damage than expected, the shark reacted violently. It began spinning around in the water, with the current sphere flowing in the opposite direction of the spin. The teeth on its skin also began shooting out toward Jake, and the shark shook his body in violent ways.

Jake held on as long as he could. However, the arm inside the shark's body was fully stuck, the shark still not wanting to let him go. The teeth on its skin began growing towards the arm and dug into it. But it didn't stop there as the teeth began growing into the arm itself, and, more frighteningly, Jake felt an odd sensation in his body.

Like his very blood was being manipulated. Blood began pouring out his nose and eyes as Jake made an executive decision. Without any hesitation, he used Eternal Hunger to cut off the still-stuck hand that had been embedded into the shark just below the elbow. The blood manipulation stopped instantly as Jake kicked off the massive body of the shark, swimming away from it.

As he flew back, Jake used his necklace to deposit a healing potion into his mouth, which he naturally consumed instantly. Dense vital energy entered his body as Jake felt it flow through his bloodstream and into the severed arm as it worked to reconstruct it.

Jake momentarily stopped up. Blood and healing... fuck, not now.

The shark came for him again, trying to press its advantage. Jake's plan was slightly thrown off course, but he could correct it. Retreating, Jake bought time for his arm to regrow as he attempted to not get pinned down and eaten. Unable to properly use his bow, Jake switched to mainly using arcane magic and Eternal Hunger. One had to add that the healing from Eternal Hunger was one of those things he usually didn't notice due to its passive nature, but it was not something to underestimate. Granted, Jake was underutilizing the mythical weapon and was far from able to properly make use of it, but just the lifesteal effect brought his longevity in combat to another level.

He ended up tanking many hits as he protected his left side, where an arm and hand were slowly growing out. Jake spent mana like it was no object trying to keep the shark at bay, shooting off endless barrages of stable arcane bolts. The explosive ones did nothing, but he had found that hyper-sharp stable bolts penetrated the teeth hide and caused damage.

One Step was also used liberally to take him away and constantly create distance too. In the end, it was impossible to avoid taking any damage as his body was littered with wounds after only a few minutes. But it was good enough.

The shark, drunk on momentum, did not show any caution as it charged. Jake, having regenerated his arm and hand, pulled out his bow. Surprise flashed in the eyes of the C-grade as Jake grinned and charged Arcane Powershot. Having already committed, the shark did not slow down but instead sped up as it opened its maw. A dense barrier of water was made as the entire sphere shifted and gathered in front of the shark. It churned and spun, aiming to cut everything apart, including any arrows Jake would shoot at it.

Jake focused to the extreme as Steady Aim activated at its fullest. The Arcane Powershot was charged to near-full power as he released an explosive arcane arrow. The super-charged arrow hit the barrier and exploded as Jake had already pulled out a second, far larger arrow.

This one looked nearly like a drill. It was entirely white and far longer than the one he shot before, with several odd markings on its body. It was an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, and with the barrier gone, he shot it fast without even using Arcane Powershot.

The shark was ready and prepared to dodge. Jake had been waiting for this moment as he, through the arcane energy filling the water, laid his eyes upon the large shark and used Gaze of the Apex Hunter for the first time in the fight. The C-grade froze, unable to dodge the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter... but this attack was not the true finisher.

Jake charged forward after the arrow, pushing both of his wings to the extreme to build up speed. The shark was not ready at all when the arrow entered the shark's mouth. It was even less prepared when a charging human was about to do the same. Just as Jake was at the mouth of the beast, he took out both katars and activated all his Hunting Momentum built up so far.

His entire body filled with the concept as he shot forward even faster into the mouth of the C-grade shark. The arrow had done plenty of damage, and Jake bee-lined for his target: the heart. Just as he was

in the body of the shark, Gaze wore off. The beast had only been stunned for a second, but in that second, the battle had entirely changed. The momentum had switched.

Upon entering the shark's mouth, it became clear why it was keen on eating things. Jake had entered a maelstrom of teeth and incredibly fast currents as his entire body began getting cut apart. With full power, Jake used the bone katar to punch forward and released a Descend Dark Arcane Fang to cut through the inner walls of flesh to make his way to the heart.

The Hunting Momentum was all spent, but it allowed him to reach his target. Jake finally saw the heart and stabbed Eternal Hunger into it. The bone dagger disappeared from his other hand as Jake used Touch of the Malefic Viper with it to control and redirect all the hemotoxin poison in the C-grade's body to the heart.

What hemotoxins did pre-system was primarily to thin the blood. Post-system, it had a similar effect but on vital energy. Blood was a vessel for vital energy and remained thinned, but the vital energy itself was also far thinner and flowed more easily out of the body, along with its decreased efficiency. So what happened when Jake plunged what was effectively a metal straw into his opponent's container of highly-thinned vital energy?

He finally gave Eternal Hunger a good meal.

Razor-sharp teeth still flew all around Jake as he was cut up, but each wound healed as fast as it came as Jake stood his ground. The vital energies of the shark streamed into Jake through Eternal Hunger as the shark thrashed and tried to kill him. Intense pressure, long teeth trying to kill him, and even the flesh walls themselves closed in on him, but the shark was fighting a losing battle. Eternal Hunger greedily enjoyed its feast as slowly the shark's struggles stopped.

Jake felt the stream of vital energy stop as everything went silent. The teeth around him began floating harmlessly as the body of the shark began withering and wrinkling from the inside.

You have slain [Razorstream Shark – lvl 202] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 194 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

‘DING!’ Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 191 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

With ease, Jake cut his way out the top of the shark. With the beast dead, its body was weak and unable to resist even a casual slash. Jake looked at the shark and scanned it for any treasures and found... nothing. No, wait, on closer inspection, he found an uncommon rarity tooth.

He had felt it from the aura of the beast, but this hammered it home... Razorstream Sharks were low-tier beasts. They were firmly on the weaker end of C-grades. Jake just sucked at fighting underwater. This had been the toughest fight since the Phantomshade Panther... and it was an opponent he would have trashed if they had fought in the air.

“Are you finally done?” Sandy asked him as the worm happily swam over. Well, the worm did not really swim but seemed to still partly be swimming through space. Was a bit slower, though.

“Yes, I am done...” Jake said with exasperation.

“Would it make you happy if I said I was proud of you for killing the fish?”

“No, not really,” Jake said curtly.

“Good, because I am not... you move so weirdly down here. You really gotta work on that at some point,” Sandy lectured him.

“Just eat me already; let’s get out of here. And no more underwater adventures,” Jake shook his head.

“Fine, I don’t really like the stuff down here anyway. Too watery for my taste,” the worm agreed, making Jake want to smack the worm for convincing him to go down there to begin with.

Sandy ate him up, and once Jake was inside, he deactivated Arcane Awakening and let the weakness flood him. Okay, even if he complained, the fight had actually been good practice, and it had allowed him to test one of the many techniques he had theorized. The entire Touch-controlled hemotoxin into big slurp by Eternal Hunger was not made up on the spot but something he had considered for a while.

He had also gotten a flash of inspiration related to Blood of the Malefic Viper. All in all, it had been a worthwhile fight, but he still wanted to avoid doing that shit again. At least until he had a better way to fight down there.

Jake took a deep breath and got on with things as he felt a certain someone waiting for him in his Soulspace. Not wanting to make himself wait – because Jake knew he could be a bit impatient – Jake used Serene Soul Meditation to enter his Soulspace to talk to his other self.

Chapter 542 - A Bloody Mystery

"The fighting style itself cannot reasonably include a method to nullify negative environmental effects... we will need something else for that. There was potential in Pride of the Malefic Viper, but we need a proper method to not find ourselves in a similar situation," sim-Jake said.

"Easier said than done, considering these kinds of enemies rely on their environments and will actively try and break down any defenses you have made against them. I could likely have made an arcane barrier isolating myself from the water pressure, but the shark would instantly try to destroy it for its magic to work," Jake argued.

"I never said it was easy, just that it needs to be done. Maybe figure out how others do it. Though I will admit that it is a major hurdle. Moving in water is simply not optimal with the human body, and it eliminates all footwork and weakens every attack," sim-Jake mulled over the issue. "I can see using the destructive arcane energy as a way to partly eliminate the pressure at all times, especially when striking, but that also creates problems."

"Sustainability," Jake nodded.

"Exactly."

The mana cost from infusing every movement with mana would be too much for him to bear, and they both knew it.

"A solution will have to be found at some point," sim-Jake concluded.

“Naturally,” Jake agreed before asking something that had been on his mind. “What happened, by the way? Not to be rude, but you were on your way out the last time we met. Now, you are more you once more. What changed?”

“Honestly,” sim-Jake said. “You should know it. I am you, and you are me, and not existing is one of the thoughts that we fear on a very base level. When I did feel myself begin to fade away and become nothing, something triggered in me. A sense of survival, even though I know that remerging with you is still me surviving. I guess you can just say that I don’t wanna die. After meeting Sandy and seeing Earth transformed and not just that boring mansion in the Order and the occasional mind-numbing alchemy lesson, I realized that I still want to enjoy at least a few more adventures.”

Jake had indeed kind of known this was the case but wanted to ask anyway as he wasn’t entirely sure what his other self was thinking. “But this doesn’t mean the merging stopped.”

“No, that it does not. But let us just say that I will immortalize myself one way or another. You won’t be rid of me that easily. Luckily too, because there is more to improve in our fighting style than I originally estimated, and two heads are better than one,” sim-Jake said. “Ah, and don’t worry, our new Vault skill will come, even if I know that the Records of that skill keeps me alive right now. Keeps me, me.”

“Just don’t begin to get any fancy ideas about taking over the body and replacing me,” Jake smirked.

“We both know that won’t happen. I can’t. Your Records trump mine so many times over it isn’t even funny. Being best buds with Villy is just cheating,” sim-Jake snickered in return. “Now go back to Sandy’s stomach and get to work. I have business to attend to.”

Jake shrugged and complied as he exited his Soulspace, leaving sim-Jake behind.

Sim-Jake did not immediately begin practicing but went towards the chimera of pure curse energy. It looked satisfied after having a feast and didn't even react as sim-Jake laid a hand on it. Closing his eyes, energy moved between them for a few minutes before he nodded and returned to improving the Vault skill.

Jake, in the outside world, had not seen any of this happen but was busy getting back the glove he had lost in the body of the shark. Rather than needing to retrieve the physical object, Jake could use the remaining glove to regrow the other one on his formerly severed hand. It would have been cheaper to just retrieve the glove, but he had honestly forgotten about it as the item had turned inert after he cut off the hand. Sandy had already shot above the water and was flying through the sky, so turning back was not an option either.

Watching it reform on his hand over the next hour was relatively interesting. It was all system-fuckery to the extreme, but he was not complaining. Once the glove was back in his hand – and put on his hand - Jake turned his attention to something perhaps even more important.

During the fight with the shark, he had a eureka moment. More accurately, as he felt his blood flow and carry the vital energies, he questioned something.

Blood was a damn great vessel for energy. It was what made Blood of the Malefic Viper such a potent skill and why there were many creatures you could slay, and their blood turned into valuable items. Vampires consumed blood due to its richness and purity of vital energy too. All in all, blood was essentially a naturally-occurring treasure-tier liquid found within most biological lifeforms.

Its usual effect was carrying vital energy through the body more efficiently. Heck, this was why regenerating dozens of holes in the body was easier than healing a severed hand, even if the pure mass of flesh one had to heal was larger. Regenerating the hand relied mostly on transporting energy through the Soulshape, while holes in the body could be supplied with blood in the nearby area to heal faster.

Healing potions also instantly attached themselves to the blood of the body and used that to find where it was most efficiently used. Because the body naturally knew where the vital energy was needed.

Blood was clearly tied to vital energy, and vital energy comes from Vitality. Blood of the Malefic Viper even gave Vitality, and it was a fact that someone with more Vitality could produce more blood than someone that had a lower stat. All of those things were true, and yet Blood of the Malefic Viper had nada to do with vital energy at all.

[Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The blood of the Malefic Viper is a toxin more deadly than most poisons. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn their blood poisonous, imitating their Patron. It has been further improved, even carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic One within. The blood can be used as an ingredient in alchemy and as a deadly weapon against your foes. The nature of the poison is determined based on the Records of the Alchemist. The blood's toxicity level is based primarily on Vitality and Wisdom but receives an increase from all physical stats. Passively provides 1 Vitality per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your blood be forever the bane of all that wishes you harm.

The more Jake thought about it, the less it made sense. The skill gave him Vitality, but nothing about the skill seemed to truly indicate it had anything to do with the stat. For all other skills, he saw it make far more sense, but not with this one. Heck, the toxicity of the infused blood scaled with Vitality and Wisdom. They were equal when it came to scaling, but with all other skills, the stat it offered was also the one that empowered the skill the most.

Jake reflected a bit on the skill. He had first gotten it at epic rarity and then upgraded to Ancient after the Trial of Myriad Toxins by absorbing the drop of blood from Villy. That had been the catalyst, and what was that drop of blood?

It was a fragment of Records. It was knowledge given physical form, which could also be seen with how it was tied to Sagacity. So the upgrade path Jake had gone back then was by making the blood better when used and giving it far more scope. The part about carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic

One was a buff when it came to alchemy too. All of this made Jake think he had missed something obvious.

He began experimenting right away as he tried out his theory. Jake could not truly control the blood he infused, and he had always used it as an external tool, either as an ingredient or a weapon. However, blood was meant to be inside the body the last time he checked, so would there not be an application there?

Focusing, he infused the blood inside his body as usual. This time, he tried to control it – something usually not needed as the blood adapted according to his will after being added to a mixture. It was more difficult than Jake expected, and he ended up having to apply some methods from his usual alchemy as he effectively turned his body into a cauldron and the blood in his body into the batch. But rather than a poison, Jake wanted to make a health potion.

The result? Him spending the better part of an hour only experiencing failure. The worst part was that Jake knew what he was missing; he just couldn't fix it. He needed to properly infuse more active vital energy into the blood, but he couldn't control the process, at least not satisfactorily. As he wondered what to do, Jake got a brilliant idea.

Taking out Eternal Hunger, Jake proceeded to cut off his hand once more and consumed a health potion. Vital energy flooded his body and, as usual, bound itself to his blood. Jake then began the process again, but rather than trying to infuse vital energy from scratch, Jake used the energy from the healing potion as a base and guide. He poisoned the healing potion liquid and tried to make it better. It went okay as he focused on healing the severed hand for the second time that day.

Once it was healed, Jake kept experimenting until the potion cooldown was ready, and he cut it off again. This continued for nearly an entire day as he slowly began to form a coherent idea and became more familiar with his blood and vital energy both.

He was still not quite certain what the purpose of what he was trying to achieve was besides making more active vital energy to make his blood better when it came to healing. Jake did feel like he made some progress, but he needed the healing potion every time to properly do it. The highly-active energy in healing potions was the apex of vital energy due to the amount of system assistance it got, and Jake knew he could not actually replicate it, but he wanted to at least make some progress...

Or just make his usage of the healing potion better.

Another day passed, and Sandy didn't ask him to come out a single time, even if the worm did find some stuff to steal here and there. It was understood that Jake did not want any more water combat, and Sandy, quite frankly, also didn't seem to enjoy being underwater that much either.

This day was spent with Jake cutting off his arm a good forty or so times total, sometimes choosing not to use a healing potion as he healed it. He also tried inflicting injuries on himself in other places. He even took some of the venom from that Emperor Urchin that the whale had given him and consumed it. It was potent enough to deal noticeable damage, even if it was primarily of a neurotoxic nature. He needed it for Palate either way, so why not?

He began to feel like he was touching upon an idea, but he was still missing something. Jake was certain that with another week or so, he would have it down... but he wasn't that patient when he had other options.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 2

Jake did not know if the charges would carry over to C-grade or if the skill changed, so he should use them all now, right? Also... he kind of liked learning about Villy. It was a bit like stalking your friends on social media for embarrassing photos from their teenage years, and Jake was all for it to get some ammunition to make fun of the god with.

With that in mind, Jake activated the skill as he experienced another vision.

“I am once more incredibly impressed with your continued progress,” the old man said as he smiled proudly. “To do all this without any dedicated alchemy skill...”

“Saying it is entirely without a skill isn’t correct, Master,” the Viper in his human form said. “While it is true they are not dedicated alchemy skills, there are stark similarities.”

“True. However, you specialize in poison as per your heritage. This is the exact opposite of that,” the old man shook his head. “And yet it isn’t. As unsightly as it is, an old man like me does find it enviable to have such heavenly gifts. A body that is an alchemical ingredient in itself.”

Jake was confused as he observed the scene playing out in front of him. He saw the Viper sitting with a cauldron inside of a large stone chamber, with the old man scrutinizing his work. Moreover, the Viper said a word Jake could have never imagined the Viper would say... he had called the old man Master. He also felt like the Viper was pretty young in this vision, but he wasn’t sure if it was the youngest he had seen him. It had to be close.

“And I wish I had Master’s knowledge of alchemy,” the Viper smiled.

“Heh,” the old man chuckled. “I have no doubt you will surpass this old man in due time. You will learn all I have to teach with the time I have left.”

A sense of sadness came over the room as the Viper frowned.

“There is no reason to be sad,” the old man soothed the Viper. “Time will claim all, but we enlightened races have our own Path to immortality. As long as our knowledge remains, so shall we remain. The Records of the multiverse are forever. Any who dies; any who has lived and will ever live is eternal.”

“Easy for you to call knowledge eternal... why not pursue actual immortality?” Villy scoffed.

“Because knowledge can be both a curse and a gift, and your old Master had decided his Path,” the old man shook his head at the would-be Primordial. “Now stop dallying and explain to me the process of what you are attempting to do.”

“Fine,” the Viper said as he looked down at what he had just brewed. “So, the thought process behind this attempt was to...”

Jake listened but began to zone out even if he knew he should be listening. He couldn’t stop himself as he stared more at the old man and faintly noticed something. Something that was barely detectable, perhaps due to the nature of the vision... the old man had a Bloodline. That in itself was noteworthy, but what stood out more was that it felt familiar. He had seen it before, which made no sense. Because the one who Jake remembered having the Bloodline was also present in the room.

This old man had the same Bloodline as the Malefic Viper.

Chapter 543 - What Even Is A Health Potion?

Jake was absolutely certain of one thing: two identical Bloodlines could not exist. Even if someone with a Bloodline had a child, the child would have their own Bloodline with its own unique signature. One

would be able to feel the difference between two family members even if the effects of their Bloodlines were identical.

But the old man had the exact same Bloodline as Villy. Jake was completely zoned out of the vision where the two discussed as he tried to figure out how the hell this was possible. It was impossible for the Viper to somehow be the kid of this old man, and one could not give their Bloodlines to others as the Bloodline resided in the Truesoul. Only the system could give a Bloodline, the Viper had said to himself. So Jake saw only one explanation.

The Viper had gained this old man's Bloodline sometime after he had died. Assuming the Viper had been truthful when he said he got his Bloodline after reaching godhood, then it had to be a lot of time afterward. However, this also raised some questions. Had the Viper requested this Bloodline? If he had, then it had to be a powerful Bloodline, and if it was a powerful Bloodline, then why was the old man stuck at peak C-grade and talking about his time soon being up? Maybe it was just Jake being biased, but he assumed anyone with a truly powerful Bloodline should at least be able to break through to B-grade.

I will definitely have an interesting talk with Villy after this, Jake confirmed to himself as he began to actually focus on the vision at hand.

It was just the Viper explaining what he was doing, and what he was doing was trying to make a healing poison using his blood. The Viper talked about how it was hard to fully isolate the vital energies in the blood both before he put it in the cauldron and when it was in there.

Jake listened in attentively and quickly got the gist of it as he had been struggling with the same thing during the last few days. His issue was that the Blood of the Malefic Viper infused blood was so tied to him it was difficult to make it more untied. This was not a problem with poison usually, as it was just a catalyst and got infused into all the other materials, but in this case, he wanted it to be a primary ingredient.

As for why he wanted it? He wanted to make a “better” health potion that acted faster and maybe didn’t even trigger the potion cooldown. One that could help him heal a wound incredibly fast and resonate with his Blood of the Malefic Viper. He also just wanted to see if he could upgrade Blood to allow him to heal faster in general.

The health potion was more a representation of what he wanted and a way to practice isolating and controlling the vital energy in his blood, not the primary objective. The Viper said the same as he explained how he wanted to better control his vital energies and blood in general.

“Heh,” the old man chuckled. “I find it interesting how you try to create a health potion when that is not truly what you want to make. Controlling your blood better is only one piece of the puzzle, and you will never be able to infuse enough vital energies into the blood to heal fast enough for what you want. If you want that, you need to heal yourself in the ethereal realm – heal your Soulshape – and not your physical body. But we both know the inefficiency in that... so what you truly want is a way for your body to do what you want it to and for more vital energy to work at once. A healing potion does supercharge you with vital energy, true, but what is the biggest obstacle when trying to infuse your blood to heal you faster?”

“Time,” the Viper instantly said. “But a health potion fixes that; I just need it to-“

“Why does it need to be a health potion, and why do you need to infuse your blood every time?” the old man asked pointedly.

“I am not sure I get it,” the Viper said. “I need a health potion for it to heal... I have tried making toxins that heal me, but it never works. And I need to infuse my blood every time for the vital energy to be properly carried in it.”

“Is that because your blood is bad at carrying energy?”

“Well, it is good at carrying energy, but only toxic energies... but... I think I understand what you are getting at. You want me to attune my blood to better carry vital energy, but won’t that just be a step backward after I improved it to better carry mana?”

“Vital energy, mana, stamina, why do we have to put a label on everything? Why do we need to define what a poison and a healing potion are anyway? The system shall handle all the definitions we need; we just need to force our own understanding. Who is to say a poison cannot be a healing potion and a healing potion cannot be a poison? Ask yourself, who is it meant to heal? If it only needs to heal one person, why does it matter if it is poison or not? As long as it to you is a healing potion, the system shall respect your will,” the old man smiled.

He opened his palm as an orb of energy appeared. Jake felt the intense vital energy from it as it suddenly changed into mana, and then into stamina, and back into vital energy again. With a swipe of his hand, the vital energy suddenly spread out throughout the room and hit the walls, making cracks appear all over them. Another pulse of pure stamina was released that somehow repaired the walls. No, had it not been mana there right at the end? Jake wasn’t sure...

“Energy is energy; as long as you have one, you have them all. You think too much about making your blood work with one or the other when you need it to work with all of them. Your body is your temple, and you decide the design. Your blood is a part of your body, just like any other element. If you can control how your hand moves, how fast your heart beats, and know how to smile like you are right now... so can you dictate what your blood is,” the old man said. “Within reason, of course.”

Jake barely considered the words as he was still stuck on what the actual fuck the old man had done before when he demonstrated the energies. The level of energy control he deployed was... not normal as in, absolutely bonkers. Jake had no idea how the hell he had done what he did. Jake could also change mana into vital energy and vice-versa, but that was a long and arduous process when crafting. Not what the old man had just done where he morphed the energies effortlessly in seconds. No, less than seconds.

The Viper also stared at the old man as his eyes shone with enlightenment. Jake then felt himself truly merge with the Viper and instantly noticed some differences. Jake's blood was not toxic by default but infused with heavy doses of vital energy, while the Viper's blood primarily had poison in it. He naturally healed from vitality-based poisons in his body, whereas Jake healed from regular vital energy.

It was nearly the opposite of Jake, as Jake had to put effort into making his blood toxic, and Villy had to put effort into making it non-toxic. But what the Viper did now was more or less to prime the blood. Make it far more malleable to other energies, using the system's assistance to make it all possible. This instantly made the level of toxicity in his blood rise, and Jake did not hesitate to join in as he mimicked the Viper – but with the opposite result.

His blood became more filled with vital energy as he repeated the process of what the Viper did. Yet he also felt like all poison made from it would be more potent. What Jake did when he infused Blood of the Malefic Viper with mana and turned it toxic was just to use the mana as a catalyst to change the vital energy. It was all process that was now being refined and improved.

One could almost say the blood became thicker. Better at carrying energy than before. It did come with the cost of each drop of blood being more valuable, and hence Jake or the Viper losing more health points upon wounded and bleeding... but the tradeoff was worth it, and it wasn't a one-to-one increase either. Because Jake also felt that each health point now counted ever-so-slightly more.

Moreover, the total capacity of the blood changed as it was ready to receive energy at any point.

The old man came with a few comments here and there as Jake and the Viper both meditated. About half an hour passed before the Viper opened his eyes, smiling from success. Jake was still not there and was about to curse as time rewound till just about when the Viper began meditating, skipping the first conversation.

This time around, Jake got it, and as he willed it, the time rewound the third time to show the entire starting talk. The Viper and old man chatted as Jake just listened in, still feeling the changes in his body. A bit later, the vision ended, and Jake returned to the real world with an upgraded skill and a lot of questions.

Jake appeared within Sandy's stomach with the worm not even asking where he had gone this time. Without further ado, he checked out the upgrade.

[Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient --> Legendary)] – The blood of the Malefic Viper is a toxin more deadly than most poisons and the lifeblood of an immortal being. Allows the Alchemist to infuse their blood with energy to turn their blood poisonous, imitating their Patron and even carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic One within. The blood can be used as an ingredient in alchemy or as a deadly weapon against your foes. The nature of the poison is determined based on the Records of the Alchemist. Allows your blood to carry more energy than usual, including vital energy, passively speeding up regeneration. This effect is further amplified when consuming a health potion or other sources of beneficial vital energy. The blood's toxicity level is based primarily on Vitality and Wisdom but receives an increase from all physical stats. Increase in natural regeneration based on total health pool. Passively provides 3 Vitality per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your blood be forever the bane of all that wishes you harm and that which brings you eternal life.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 189 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 190 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 192 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

It was as expected for the most part. The two levels were a nice surprise, as Jake had only expected a single one. For the skill itself, a bit of the wording had changed here and there, but the big takeaways were that it specified the blood now carried more energy than before, and that effect was further amplified when using a healing potion. But, it still specified that what Jake did when he infused his blood was to turn it poisonous. He could not simply infuse it with more vital energy if he wanted to when he used the skill.

To add on, due to his blood now passively carrying more vital energy, it increased his natural regeneration. He could feel it wasn't by much, but it was there. The big thing was that this effect was amplified after using a healing potion, and the entire increase in regeneration was based on his total health pool.

Finally, there was also an increase in Vitality for each level. Considering Jake was towards the end of D-grade, the instant influx of stats was huge, especially considering Vitality was the stat in which he had the second-best percentage amplifier due to the Bloodline Patriarch title and Blessing of the Malefic Viper both including it.

With a bit of excitement, Jake cut off the hand for the hundredth or so time over the last few days. Instantly he felt his vital energy move as it began naturally regenerating. It healed faster than before, no doubt about it, but it wasn't like it just suddenly popped out. He would estimate about twenty-five percent faster, with the vital energy consumption about ten percent higher, to achieve the same effect. Health Point-wise, he lost about the same.

After he fully healed the hand, he repeated chopping it off again and then drank a potion. This time around, the change was noticeable. Before the upgrade, it took Jake a few minutes to heal a hand, but now?

He watched intently as what appeared like blood vessels grew into thin air. Soon they transformed into bones, flesh grew on the bones, and his hand reformed. The entire process took only thirty to forty seconds, and Jake nodded, knowing this was not the best it could be.

Taking out his cauldron, he got to work. The vision had not been solely about transforming his blood but also about how to use it. To make full use of it. One of the objectives had been to make a healing potion, after all.

When Jake usually made a healing potion, he didn't use any Blood of the Malefic Viper. His blood was inherently a poison, there was no way around it, and even this upgrade did not change that. Jake made healing potions according to the methods he had read in books and followed the recipes to the T as, well, it worked. He had never even considered using his blood over purified water when making a health potion. Not that Jake hadn't tried to make beneficial things with his blood, as he had done just as the Viper and tried to make a vitality-based poison that could help heal him. One that could even circumvent the potion cooldown.

Jake now realized that the entire thought process was flawed. Health potions worked because they were health potions, not because of all the ingredients put into them. When Jake tried to make these poisons of vital energy, he – and the Viper from the sounds of it – had missed the most essential ingredient of a health potion: a truckload of system-fuckery.

Without further ado, Jake began the crafting process of a health potion. The only true change was that Jake poured in his blood as the base rather than water. He knew that he first had to prime the blood and make it focused on vital energy, which was indeed what he started out by doing. Once the liquid was ready, Jake just did as he usually did when making a health potion, following the recipe to the letter.

And as usual, the process was straightforward. Perhaps a bit more challenging than usual, but it was not much, and after only failing two brews, Jake succeeded.

You have successfully crafted [Malefic Health Potion (Common)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned

Jake looked at the batch and bottled up some of the liquid. It was red, just like a normal health potion, but he did get a slight reaction from Sense of the Malefic Viper when looking at it, making it clear this was poisonous.. Using Identify on the potion, he was surprised, though.

[Malefic Health Potion (Common)] - Restores 22310 health when consumed. Will cause damage to anyone besides the creator if consumed.

Jake stared at it for a while. Everything was pretty much as expected, and what Jake had made was poison to any who was not him. The rarity was common as expected too. Jake knew that rarity was based solely on the amount of resources a potion restored, and after entering the academy, he had learned that the minimum for uncommon rarity potions was a hundred thousand resources restored. Yet the number still stood out.

This was the first health potion Jake had ever made that restored over twenty thousand health, and it had instantly jumped to twenty-two thousand. It was about a twenty-five percent increase from his usual max... about the same as what his natural regeneration had increased with.

After putting all the liquid in bottles, Jake – once again – cut off his hand. With great expectations, he chugged the new health potion. It did not disappoint.

Instantly blood vessels sprung out into thin air, and a red hand shape was formed where it was supposed to be as flesh grew on the bones within seconds. The red shape was filled out, and skin grew over it all. Finally, with a simple mental command, Jake equipped the glove.

Seven seconds.

From drinking the potion to fully regenerating a hand, it had taken him seven seconds. Jake grinned from ear to ear to himself at the result as one of his biggest weaknesses – amputation - had been significantly addressed. He was more than happy with the upgrade and also felt that the blood was just overall more potent now in every way, which would empower all poisons he made by a little. All in all, great stuff.

With all of that done, Jake moved on to the final thing. His talk with Villy.

Chapter 544 - The First Sage

He reached out and instantly felt the connection form. “Hey Villy, I-“

“Jake, just know that Duskleaf and I are both here for you in your time of need. You do not need to resort to self-harm like that, okay? We are willing to talk, so you can stop cutting your hand off. It has suffered enough... no, you have suffered enough,” Villy’s voice descended with the fakest tone of concern Jake had ever heard.

“Ha, ha, very funny,” Jake responded to the quip from the Viper. Just because Jake had cut off his hand a hundred times or so over the last few days didn’t mean he was into self-harm.

Well, except if it was productive self-harm, in which case he was all for it.

“Heh, so, got a good upgrade this time around? From a cursory glance, it seems like you finally managed to upgrade Blood. I had quite honestly expected that to be one of the first ones considering you stole a drop from me,” the Viper said.

“Yep, I got it, as well as a vision...” Jake.

“Spill it. What kind of embarrassing moment did it show you now? Oh, I know. Is it this time I filled an entire lake with my blood and turned it into a “healing potion” to help the local wildlife, only to poison them all and end up killing off an entire army, to then just get pushed out of the area by a giant weasel that was immune to my toxins?” the Viper asked.

“No, but I am sure there is an interesting story there. This vision was quite a bit more relaxed but far more intriguing. First of all... I didn’t know you once had someone you called Master?” Jake asked a bit teasingly. “You seemed to respect him a lot too. Truly a loyal disciple.”

A few seconds passed. “I have had several people whom I would call Master throughout my life. But based on me actually showing genuine respect, only one comes to mind. The original owner of my Bloodline.”

“That is the one,” Jake said. “So, what is the story there? I have so many questions.”

“You know, Jake... you are the first one besides my wife to ever know about him. Not even the other Primordials are aware he existed,” Villy said in a very out-of-character serious, and melancholic tone.

“I never even learned his name, only knowing his title. He was simply known as the First Sage. For reference, the country he belonged to had sages as their elders of sorts, and he was naturally the

highest-ranked one. He, too, was alive when the system arrived and was already an accomplished, if troubled, man. I took quite a bit longer to progress through the grades than many others and, quite honestly, fell behind. The area of the planet I was from was considered weak and desolate, so by the time I reached C-grade, the world was already full of them. However, on my planet at the time, there was no doubt who the most powerful person was. He was a man who I believed I could fool, and I wanted to take advantage of him to teach me alchemy. The old man saw through my disguise like nothing and instantly knew I was the feared Wyvern of the Desolates. But what did he do? He invited me in for tea.”

Villy spoke with far more emotion than Jake was used to, making him just shut up.

“He was intrigued by my skills and wanted to learn more about me. Tell me, Jake, from what you saw did he strike you as a talented alchemist?” Villy asked.

“For sure,” Jake said. The old man had been insanely talented and was no doubt-

“He wasn’t one. In fact, he never truly chose to specialize anywhere but always ended up pursuing new things. On top of that, he was not a fighter, not because he couldn’t fight, but because he chose not to. I understood why. There was not a single entity on our planet that stood a sliver of a chance against him.”

“I don’t understand... if he was this strong and talented, along with having a Bloodline, why didn’t he evolve into B-grade? Or did he end up evolving?” Jake asked.

“No, he died still in peak C-grade,” Villy answered, exasperation clear in his voice. “To this day, it still troubles me. I actually think meeting him was one of the reasons I even managed to become a god. Jake, you are talented, but this man... was something more. Your talents are bizarre but specialized, while he was a universal genius. A jack of all trades, master of all. With no effort, any skill he had would reach legendary rarity and beyond. It was like he didn’t truly exist within the world like the rest of us. As if he

stood above it and observed. By the time I was in peak C-grade, I knew I still would not have stood a chance against him. Not that I would have after just evolving to B-grade either... he was a monster. Far more than I."

"I am just getting more and more confused here," Jake said. "Why not evolve then? What stopped him?"

"Nothing except his own will. He... chose not to evolve. As I said, to this day, it still troubles and frustrates me. He could have evolved, and truthfully, I do not doubt he would have become a god. But he had no desire to be one. He had barely any desire at all. Like such desires were beneath him, or perhaps just not something he cared about," the Viper explained. "I partly understood why, for he was also pained. Tortured. He did not wish to keep living, and to him, perhaps immortality would have been a curse."

Jake's frown only deepened, but he didn't interrupt without getting asked.

"The First Sage taught me only for about a decade. During this time, I never left his side and took in everything like a sponge. My alchemy reached levels I had never even imagined, but more than that, he helped refine my mindset. If you haven't noticed, I like to find ways to take advantage of the system. This man was the one who originally instilled those thoughts into me. He was also the first one to teach me what a Transcendent was. He was a premier scholar in all things system and what he discovered back then is now common knowledge throughout the multiverse. The knowledge that man had was out of this world... and before you ask, then yes, he was a Transcendent. Not just one either... I learned of four Transcendent skills he possessed, but he might have had more I never knew about. Wanna hear the funniest thing? One of them was made with the express purpose of shortening his lifespan.

"If you think that one of the reasons for his blight was his Bloodline, then you would be entirely correct. I have told you it is not one that offers combat power, and that is entirely correct. In fact, many would call its effects rather mundane if not useless. I have never told you what it does, and I guess it is about time I tell you, considering how much I know about yours."

Jake would be lying if he said he wasn't curious. Especially after hearing so much about the original owner.

"Its name is short and sweet. Bloodline of the Immortal Mind. It gives no stats, no boosts to anything... besides one thing. It gives perfect memory," Villy explained, leaving a pause for Jake to ask.

"But don't you get that already with high enough stats?" Jake asked predictably.

"You do, which is why many find the Bloodline useless and unnecessary. I will also admit that I was critical of it, as the First Sage explained, but I have come to believe it was a big contributor to his power. Allow me to explain. As I said, like me, he existed before the system arrived, and yet he had a Bloodline that allowed perfect memory, which makes me question if perhaps this allowed him to know and remember things the system never intended for anyone to be aware of."

"Is that why you wanted it? Wait, how did you even get it?" Jake asked, confused.

"As I said, I got it from a system event after becoming a god. It was a bit like your Tutorial, and in the end, you could request a reward. I asked for the Bloodline of the First Sage, and to my surprise, the system gave it. Not cheaply, but cheaper than expected. Once more, I felt like the old man had expected this to someday happen," Villy explained.

"I see," Jake simply answered. "Why did you leave your first master? I cannot believe you learned everything from him in only a few years."

"I did not," Villy said, hesitant to continue.

"Then why?"

"I told you my first Master was peculiar, and it was only at the end I realized his true purpose in making me his student. You see, he was obsessed with Records to a probably unhealthy level and wanted to ensure that even after death, they remained known. To him, they were the truly perfect form of memory. The memory of the world itself. I don't know how or why, but he clearly believed that I would be able to reach the pinnacle and thus chose me. He wanted to immortalize his existence through me and through the system," Villy said as he sighed.

"The old man had only ever asked me one favor, and it came in those final days. The only thing he ever asked me was to remember him and absorb his Records once and for all. He asked me to kill him," the Viper said, sadness in his voice.

"It was also only then I truly became aware of how much he suffered. You see, usually, memories are controlled. Your brain only pulls something up when you need to remember it, but for the First Sage, it wasn't like this. He remembered everything all the time. Don't even begin to think you can comprehend what that is like. He spent ages simply becoming able to function. But what truly made him suffer was remembering all that once was. Every little negative thing, every setback, every period of grief he experienced every day. Do you think negativity bias is bad for normal humans? For him, it was all-consuming. He never showed it, not truly, but after I got the Bloodline myself, I understood. It is said time heals all wounds, and trauma and grief eventually fade? To him, every second of every day was filled with those emotions, like he had experienced mere moments before," Villy explained, but Jake got an odd feeling.

As if he was not only talking about his old Master but himse-

“Before you say it... yes, I experience this negative downside too. However, there is a stark difference between him and me. First of all, I got the Bloodline after becoming a god and can handle all this far better. Second of all, I was not born with it and thus had ways to still separate it from the core of my being. Thirdly, and perhaps the most important one: his mindset differed from mine. He was more emotional on a base level, and he grieved more than I ever did. Even when I suffer, my first thought is not to grieve but to try and fix the problem. I comfort myself with pretty lies of being able to find a solution. And I can admit that even if the Bloodline has downsides, the benefits it brings are also exemplary. I wanted it for a reason,” Villy said.

“Did you... you know?” Jake asked.

“Yes. How could I not fulfill the one request my Master ever made of me? I did not want to, but I respected him too much to refuse. However, as I said, then I like my pretty little lies. He wanted to be immortal but not alive, and he found his Path through me. Today he is forever immortalized through the Records of the multiverse, and to him, dying was simply a form of transcending above the mundane world. Transcending through me. I still remember his smile as his life faded, and that is the memory I choose to see over his times of suffering,” the Viper said, Jake practically seeing his sad smile on the other end.

Jake just sat silently, not saying anything. He had never heard Villy speak this highly of anyone before, not even his fellow Primordials. There was always a quip in there, a joke about their shortcomings... but with this First Sage, there was only sad recognition.

Neither of them spoke for a while, even as the telepathic connection remained. Jake did not ask any of his usual questions, like if the Viper thought Jake would be able to match the old man if they were the same level or anything like that. Jake already knew that the answer wouldn't be one he wanted to hear... not necessarily because it would be a no but because of how pointless it was. A minute or so more passed before Villy sighed.

“The First Sage is the apex of why motivation and drive are important. He had the talent of a thousand geniuses but the will to claim power of none. There was no passion in anything he did, and he truly never cared to get stronger. There was only a sense of hopelessness, like the Path he once followed was impossible. Or, perhaps, in death, he got exactly what he wanted. I truly don’t know, as even now, his mentality and mind are above my level of comprehension. All I know is that he was perhaps someone that was never meant to have existed, but that I am glad he did,” Villy finally finished.

“Next time we meet,” Jake said with a smile. “Let’s share a toast for the old man. While it was brief, I also learned some good stuff from him, and you are not the only one grateful he lived.”

“Let’s do that,” Villy said on the other side with a smile.

No more words were necessary as the connection was cut off soon after that, leaving Jake alone inside the stomach of Sandy. His mind was still filled with thoughts as he considered everything. While Jake had to recognize the old man had him beaten in energy control... Jake was not aiming to be the best at everything.

He was fine with just being the best at killing things.

Feeling his distance from Sylphie and Haven, Jake triangulated it and concluded he would soon reach his goal. The mountains the Fallen King had made his home were close to the ocean, and they would get straight there as long as they continued straight ahead.

But before he reached his destination, he had some alchemy to do in preparation.

Villy cut off with the connection with Jake as he smiled a bit to himself. Parts of his memory he had sealed away were now unleashed and flooded him as he remembered times he had chosen to forget. There were many things he did not tell Jake this time around, and he truly believed that was for the better.

Knowing of the First Sage was not necessarily a good thing. The comment he was perhaps someone that never meant to exist was not just an offhand one. It wasn't that it was bad he existed, but that his existence was never intended.

Because something he had not told Jake was that the day he had killed the old man was not the final time he had seen him. The system took many forms when it appeared in front of people... Jake had described it as a humanoid monotone figure. Others had described the system as a giant floating orb, some as winged beings and others like other humanoid forms reminiscent of their own races.

As for Villy? Every time he saw the system appear in any form, he met his first Master. If it was truly him, Villy did not know as it didn't act differently from any other system entity.

But he liked to think that the old man had achieved his goal and had achieved his own form of immortality.

Chapter 545 - Annoyingly Complicated

Jake and Sandy continued their journey over the ocean as Jake worked on the upcoming battle. His talk with Villy about the First Sage had been enlightening, and the upgraded Blood of the Malefic Viper would surely help with what he wanted to do. However, it was far from enough.

Unique Lifeforms were annoying opponents; Jake had no doubt about that. This particular Unique Lifeform he would encounter was one of ash and space magic as far as he could tell. It did not have a physical body but was more like a living domain. The domain was its Soulshape and seemed to encompass a large area at a time, allowing the Ashen Phantom Devourer to move its body – ash –

anywhere within. The domain itself could also move at a fast speed if it so desired, making it a truly nightmarish being to face.

There was probably more to its abilities, but Jake got enough of an idea of what he was facing just from what he had heard so far. What he was facing would effectively be a giant elemental without many of the usual weaknesses of elementals. It would be a master at fleeing, too, according to the information Miranda had given him, so simply attacking it would not end well, even if Jake and the King somehow got it in an ambush and went all out.

The plan Jake had formed was to not fight Ell'Hakan but instead kill the Ashen Phantom Devourer by teaming up with the Fallen King. However, to do this, they needed to make sure they could actually kill the damn thing. Jake did not know how strong Ell'Hakan truly was or if he would even be able to successfully kill him, as he was an annoying bastard who relied on more than just fighting. He had an annoying gut feeling that even if he, the King, and the Sword Saint went after the orange guy together, they would fail in killing him.

This is why Jake would instead try and take out the greatest asset this other Chosen had. No matter what, successfully recruiting a Unique Lifeform into your employ wasn't easy, and losing it would be a major hit to his fighting power.

Going back to having to actually kill the Ashen Phantom Devourer, there was one major problem. It was a creature specializing in ash and space magic. Jake had seen what Neil could do and now what Sandy was capable of, and he was completely certain he would have no way to chase down a peak D-grade Unique Lifeform using space magic, even if it was injured.

The Fallen King had also mentioned this as the biggest obstacle as, apparently, the King found himself slightly superior during their fights, primarily due to his home-field advantage. One had to remember that the King was, well, a King. He received benefits from an area he had claimed which allowed him to come out on top. Far from enough to actually get a victory and they were still nearly evenly matched. A single slip-up from one party could break the balance, or if one of them managed a breakthrough of

some kind by upgrading a skill could result in either of them dying... the King the more likely to fall exactly due to this issue of the Ashen Phantom Devourer being far better at escaping.

This is where Jake came in. More accurately, his ability to be more than just a simple hunter with an arrow and bow. With his current toolkit, he had no way to kill this Ashen Phantom Devourer, and even teaming up with the King, they had no way to stop it, so this issue is what Jake would work on.

Like with the big blue mushroom once upon a time, Jake put on his thinking cap and began to theorize a solution. He needed to find a way to slow down the Unique Lifeform, but it couldn't be something that would instantly make it want to run away.

Sleeping Night Toxin was out of the question. That poison was frankly only good against human-sized or smaller foes, and this Ashen Phantom Devourer was the opposite of small. By sheer volume, considering it was a living domain, the only creature he had met with a larger Soulshape had to be the whale. Probably the giant sand worms too, but he would not know before actually seeing his foe. Which led to another problem.

Jake did not know what he was facing. Not truly. It wasn't like he could research his opponent either, as Unique Lifeforms had this annoying tendency to be unique. Samples were awesome when trying to make a counter to something, and getting a sample was absolutely impossible.

What he would make had to be a general poison not aimed at any particular enemy but be able to affect all Soulshapes. It had to be able to limit the mobility of this Ashen Phantom Devourer, hopefully making it unable to flee with its giant domain-like body. If not, then at least slow it down significantly.

To do this, Jake would clearly need very high-level material. He would also need a good quantity of it. As for the type? Well, hemotoxins would not work. Necrotic poison was also out of the question as his opponent was not biological. So he would need it to be an ethtoxin – soul poison – or a neurotoxin.

Ethtoxin and neurotoxin often went hand in hand, as ethtoxin was more classification of many different kinds of soul poison.

Neurotoxin would definitely be good. He had also been researching it quite a lot, so he had some confidence.

As stated many times prior, Jake was not a fan of fate-talk, but... some things were just too much to be a coincidence. Jake needed a good source of natural neurotoxin, and what had he just been handed not long ago? A whole crystal container full of the stuff.

[Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin (Ancient)] – The Lifeblood of a slain Emperor Urchin, an incredibly poisonous creature only found in areas with extremely dense water affinity. Its very blood is toxic to consume and especially toxic if directly injected. The Lifeblood is of a neurotoxin nature. Has many alchemical uses and is especially when combined with other neurotoxins or poisons with the water affinity.

By now, he was beginning to suspect there was some kind of foul play involved. Even if the Viper did not spy, had this Karroch god been watching the situation on Earth? While Jake could feel if people observed him, it was entirely possible the god had just kept an eye on everyone else.

Not that Jake would complain even if the weird beastmaster god had decided to help him out. Ell'Hakan had spent a long-ass time preparing and had his god help liberally, so it was only fair Jake also did a bit of cheating. It wasn't even Jake cheating... just someone else giving him an unexpected hand.

It wasn't the case either that this neurotoxin was enough and would instantly be able to accomplish his goal. The Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin was required to be injected to work correctly, so if Jake decided to use the poison as is, he would accomplish nothing. Chances are it would just harmlessly fall

through the domain of the Unique Lifeform, and the only losses the Unique Lifeform would face would be whatever ash was hit.

Jake would need to make this Lifeblood into a workable ethtoxin that did not require injection but could be directly applied to an area. One way to often do this was by making it into a mist that was passively absorbed along with atmospheric mana or having it be naturally antagonistic towards anything with a soul in the area. Both options would work in this case, but Jake was not sure making a mist would be wise. First of all, what if the Unique Lifeform, just, you know, moved out of the mist? It would also very obviously telegraph he was using poison. While Jake could try to mask it with the poison mist from Wings, he was not sure it would fool the Ashen Phantom Devourer.

So, he would have to find a subtle way to administer it while still fighting with the Ashen Phantom Devourer. A way to directly apply it to the Soulshape. As long as he administered enough, it should be adequate with his upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper, then controlling the poison.

Before he began doing anything, Jake consumed a bit more of the poison from the large crystal, making use of the large quantity he had. He knew it would not be a poison made in a day, but luckily he had a bit of time before he reached his target... and even if he was too slow, well, he could just tell Sandy to enjoy eating some more stuff.

Heck... maybe he could even make the worm find some stuff he needed for the concoction.

Caleb leaned back in his office chair and read over the recent reports. Four hundred and twenty-four. That was the number of City Lord or other high-level leaders of cities that the Court of Shadows had eliminated over the last many weeks, only to have them replaced with leaders from the United Cities Alliance. It was... a lot. All of these cities where they had killed people were also fringe members of the Holy Church or independent cities that did not ally with anyone. Needless to say, the influence of the United Cities Alliance was growing rapidly, and they had prepared for this takeover for a long time.

A knock on the door made him look up as he raised his hand and made it swing open.

Matteo walked in and handed him a token. "Job's done."

"Good work as usual," Caleb acknowledged as he took it. The soul remnants in the token confirmed the kill. The way the tokens worked was that they recorded the actual notification of a given kill, something which resonated with the Truesoul of the target. It was a truly foolproof form of authentication that nothing less than a Transcendant skill or a Bloodline could circumvent.

"How many more targets?" the most efficient assassin in the Court asked.

"Only seventeen without people already on the contract," Caleb said with a sigh. "Four of which ended with the given assassin dying, so security in those locations will be heightened. Once done, chances are Arthur will just come with more, though."

"Are those four close enough for me to take them all?" Matteo asked.

"No, only two of them are. I will have Nadia take one of the others and send team one to handle the last one once they return," Caleb shook his head. He considered going himself, but he was frankly too busy these days. At least the levels were good.

Matteo nodded as he held out his hand. Caleb took out the given tokens with the information on the targets and their locations and handed them to him. The man looked them over but didn't leave. Instead, he took a seat in another chair and looked at Caleb from across the table.

“What?” Caleb asked.

“Are you really okay with all this?” Matteo asked. “We are indirectly working against your brother no matter how we spin this. Compromising your personal values like this cannot lead to anything good.”

Caleb sighed and leaned back.

“What was the state of the last city you went to?” Caleb asked Matteo.

“It was an utter shithole,” the assassin answered without hesitation.

“Yeah, see, that is where all of this gets a bit more annoyingly complicated. The reason why these takeovers from the United City Alliance have been successful is that they are taking over from someone worse. Who would have thought that a system of governance decided solely by who was the best at killing stuff would lead to not-so-ideal City Lords?” the Judge of the Court said.

“If we were further fucking over the people of Earth just trying to survive, I would have less conflicted feelings, but as things are, I cannot say what we’re doing isn’t... good. Say what you want, but the United Cities Alliance cares about the approval of the public. They are also generally growing, and anywhere they go tends to improve for the better. I have even heard some leaders voluntarily reach out to join the United Cities Alliance and allow actual administrators from the Alliance to take over, leading to better-run cities. Who we're killing aren't pillars of the community, it is more that we are removing a few moldy support beams threatening to ruin the stability of the entire structure.”

“Doesn’t change the fact you are working against the interest of your family,” Matteo said.

“No, it doesn’t... but it does make this entire shitshow a whole lot more complicated. Also, rather than think of it as working against Jake, I would rather see it as doing him a favor, you know?” Caleb said with a slightly cheeky smile.

Matteo frowned. “How is any of this doing him a favor?”

“See, I would agree that usually making life harder for someone is a dick move, but for my brother, he tends to enjoy it. Moreover, when he returns and gets into action, I hope that a better future can come from it. He will not take this lying down.”

“What if he does not return in time? What if he does and Arthur still gets voted World Leader?” Matteo asked.

Caleb considered for a while. “I see three scenarios. The least likely is that we will simply remain. My brother leaves, and we all handy dandy hang out on Earth and use it as a branch, with Arthur being a nice ally. The second one is Arthur winning, and we leave. Even if the Court is against this, then I am willing to simply leave the Court altogether and take my family with me. Hopefully, the Order of the Malefic Viper will take us, and my gut tells me that the Malefic One would hide our family even if Jake died as a final gift to him. Finally, the most likely thing to happen if Arthur does become World Leader? This planet goes to shit, and Jake hunts him down and kills him; any kind of advantages granted by being World Leader be damned. I don’t see Valhal doing shit about it either, as while I didn’t see the contract, they are not dumb enough to not leave themselves an out and force them into a fight with the Order of the Malefic Viper.”

“Neither of those options appears particularly positive,” Matteo shook his head. “What about if the Malefic’s Chosen does return? Earth will not be the same after this, no matter what. Who will become World Leader?”

“That,” Caleb said as he tried to sound smart, “I don’t know.”

El’Hakan stared at the sun slowly descending towards the horizon as he focused. Soon it would be time. Taking out his trident, he made sure it was in top condition. He had made a small house in the middle of the plains outside of Haven and away from anywhere the humans lived. The reason was simple: he needed the Chosen to fight without any distractions.

The sun above bared down on him as he absorbed its light, the surrounding plains faintly glowing gold from the potent energy of the star. Everything was prepared, and he was ready for the fight. The plains were ready, and his domain was set.

Looking out the corner of his eyes, he saw one of the two servants stationed in their area make their way over. They had been placed in Haven to keep a look on things and make sure everything was going according to plan.

“My Lord,” the woman said as she stopped in front of him and kneeled. “The natives are still unable to break through the defenses created by the Verdant Witch and take control of the Pylon. I do not believe our interference is required unless the Malefic’s Chosen takes longer than anticipated to return.”

El’Hakan nodded. “As long as they do not manage to take control before there is less than a month to the World Congress, there shall be no worries. By then, it will be too late for the humans to claim it in time. Keep up the work and ensure things continue as they are.”

“Yes, my Lord. May I know what the intent is if the Malefic’s Chosen does not return according to predictions?” the servant asked.

“Predictions. Plural. Only a feeble plan fails if a few factors are out of place. The framework shall remain, and the objective accomplished. Have no doubt either... I believe he will make it back just in time,” Ell’Hakan simply said.

“Now go. Sunset approaches.”

The servant nodded as she rushed back towards Haven. Ell’Hakan did not look after her but instead stared at the orange glow on the clouds above and the sun slowly descending below the horizon. He sat down and marveled at the beauty of the celestial object.

Faint rays of sunlight licked his skin, and the orange glow faintly intensified. Minutes passed as the sun fully disappeared below the horizon. Staring upwards, he saw the clouds obstruct him. Gripping his trident, he raised it and felt the resonance as a beam of faint light descended. The clouds parted as the moon appeared, lighting up the blue tattoos lining his body. The plains themselves also took on a faint blue color and glowed.

Power filled him as he smiled and bowed his head towards the moon before turning and bowing towards where the sun had gone down. “Your child thanks you. Mother. Father.”

Chapter 546 - Sandy's Personal Aquarium

“I feel bad for them. Imagine just living your happy life in the water, and then suddenly, this naked monster comes down and forces you to stab them several times as you try to get away in fear. But the monster refuses and just keeps smashing his body into you in a ridiculous display of self-harm. The confusion when he then just leaves with several of your spikes in his chest must only make it worse, too,” Sandy said in a highly judgemental tone.

Jake was sitting on a jagged rock sticking out of the deep ocean, completely naked. Well, naked, as long as you didn't count the many quills sticking out of many places on his body. He ignored Sandy as he meditated, feeling the venom from the many quills course through his body. He purposefully did not eliminate it right away but slowly integrated it into his body.

He had gotten super lucky, and they had come across an area filled with sea urchins. No C-grades were around, but thousands of D-grades dwelled below, and Jake had jumped into the water with glee once he discovered them. Sense of the Malefic Viper had detected them even from a distance as they were all highly toxic and had powerful neurotoxins on their quills. From how the venom felt, Jake assumed these were all weaker versions of the C-grade he had gained the Lifeblood of. Probably also weaker variants. However, what mattered was that their venom was similar in nature.

This meant Jake had just stumbled across a living treasure trove of potential ingredients. It was also a great way to feed Palate and allowed him to get more familiar with the Lifeblood of the Sea Urchin Emperor. Consuming the actual liquid was only worth it in small quantities due to the diminishing return of Palate when eating something new. Yet he still wanted to become more familiar with it, so these lesser D-grade variants were perfect.

There was the negative side effect of Sandy being bored of waiting. Jake had spent about a day here at the many sea urchins, and he knew Sandy was getting more and more impatient. It was weird that a C-grade was so much in a rush for no reason, but Jake assumed it was just in Sandy's nature.

"I told you to find a solution then," Jake said in return, briefly exiting meditation. "As long as the sea urchins are here, we stay here. At least for a while longer."

"You just wait!" Sandy said with indignation. "I will show you!"

“Do just that,” Jake said teasingly. “Back to meditation.”

Sandy tried to say more, but Jake blocked the worm out. He opened a single eye and saw Sandy wriggle in anger up in the air, making him smirk as he reentered meditation. The poison still flowed through his body, and he absorbed it all over the next hour or so before diving under the waves again.

The Sea Urchins were all large porcupine-like creatures and were pretty much just oversized versions of the pre-system animals. The sea had many parts where it was not as deep, and this was one such place as they are close to a few islands, meaning he could make it to the seafloor only by diving a few hundred meters down.

Jake happily swam down to a big crowd of the animals, and annoyingly enough, they now no longer attacked him on sight but instead just hunkered down and erected their spikes. Not to worry, Jake could make them attack him anyway as he just barrelled into one and got himself impaled. Well, okay, not impaled, more stabbed a bit.

Each sea urchin's main body was about the size of a small two-person car, with their spikes a bit longer than that. Their sizes did vary a bit, and there were some variants here and here with different forms of venoms. Jake wanted the ones with white tips on their quills while avoiding the ones with blackened quills. He did try to get stabbed by them a bit, but they just had necrotic poison, so it wasn't that exciting.

Mind you, he hadn't gotten stabbed on purpose the first time around. These sea urchins hunted as a flock, and the first time he dove down, they had all attacked him. Their tactic was to form a barrier of themselves all around him and slowly incircle him before stabbing their prey to death.

Jake reckoned this was also the cause of their mixed toxins. Neurotoxins would make it harder for the prey to flee, while the necrotic poison would slowly whittle down and kill it. It was a good strategy, and Jake could even see C-grades die when a thousand sea urchins decided to attack. Especially larger C-grades would find themselves injected with ludicrous levels of venom.

However, this strategy of theirs quite frankly sucked against small targets. It was clear that Jake did not fit in the underwater meta where most powerful creatures were massive, and those of small size moved in huge groups. He was a singular small person, so only a handful of urchins could prick him at once. If all of them struck him at once, Jake could not come out of it alive simply due to the sheer physical damage, but as things were, they were simply not a threat.

This time around, Jake spent a few minutes down there before coming up again and integrating the venom. The last time he went down there, he killed a few to consume their Lifeblood, but sadly the system was annoying in that regard. He already knew that when a creature died, its remnant Records would be infused into select parts of their bodies. If it was weak enough, sometimes no item at all would be born, but in most cases, something would come out of it. The most usual thing was a Beastcore, and so was it with these sea urchins. If they had a Beastcore, the Lifeblood would be useless, and one of the spikes could only get infused, making it into great material for a spear but shit-tier material for Jake. He even had one of them not result in an item at all, indicating these were low-tier creatures. He could kill enough and get some blood, but he didn't feel comfortable killing hundreds for only one or two to give him Lifeblood.

Hence why Jake continued this process of diving down, getting stabbed, and going up to integrate it.

The next day Jake also began to forcefully extract some venom from some of them for further testing. On the third day, it appeared that Sandy had had enough.

As usual, Jake was sitting on his rock and meditating as the worm swept down and pushed him hard, sending him splashing into the water.

“Stop ignoring me!” Sandy yelled, finally getting Jake’s attention.

“What?” Jake said as he stopped ignoring the worm and got out of the water. “Didn’t you say you were fine with waiting a bit longer yesterday?”

“That was yesterday!” Sandy once more yelled madly. “Also! Since you are not killing these things, do you need to stay here?”

“Well, I gotta go where they go,” Jake answered with a shrug. He had taunted Sandy for a reason and hoped he had gotten through to the worm.

“Great!” Sandy said, suddenly sounding a bit happier as Jake got a feeling he had indeed managed to get his point across.

Sandy flew past Jake and down into the water as he saw the worm suck up seawater like a vacuum. Space distorted and warped as the C-grade went further down until finally, Sandy reached the seafloor where all the urchins were. The vacuum then got stronger as a whirlpool formed, sucking in hundreds of tons of sand along with several hundred of the sea urchins.

Jake caught on quick and smiled. “I only need the ones with the white-tipped quills.”

Sandy kept sucking for a minute or so more, eating close to a thousand of the D-grades, all of them between level 150 and 170. After being done sucking up, the massive worm closed its mouth for a bit

before opening it again, spitting out large sea urchins like they were watermelon seeds. Jake counted them all and saw nearly nine hundred had been tossed out.

The worm then swam up and also chomped down on Jake, sending him back to his usual cave-like stomach. Outside, Jake saw Sandy land and lay down on the large rock Jake had been sitting on earlier.

“So...”

“Ugh...” Sandy groaned. “I think I ate too much. My stomach hurts... give me a moment.”

Jake patiently waited for ten or so minutes. Throughout this time, Sandy sometimes spat out some water, some of it containing a few quills here and there. After these ten minutes, Sandy once more rose up and took to the air.

“Better thank me for making a water stomach,” Sandy complained.

“No one asked you to,” Jake chuckled. He had just heavily implied they should do something like this.

“Coercion through boredom is literally torture, and how is torturing someone not forcing them?” Sandy retorted.

“Rather than discuss the definition of torture, how about you explain what you did?” Jake asked curiously. In all honesty, even after all his time, he had no idea how Sandy worked.

"Fine, fine," Sandy agreed. "I spent these last few days figuring out how to make a bigger stomach. You see, I thought that since I can eat you and get stuff when you do the alchemy, why can't I eat other creatures and maybe get something for that? Even if it doesn't work like this, I can keep them around, and you can stop being so boring."

"So I can go there somehow?" Jake asked, unsure how the setup of Sandy's stomachs worked. His Sphere of Perception looked outside of Sandy while inside, only revealing the room he was in. He assumed this was linked to him being unable to see inside of people's bodies, even with his sphere.

"Yeah... two seconds," Sandy said. Two seconds passed before, off to the side, and a hole appeared in the floor. It looked like a manhole without the cover, and Jake saw water within.

"Is this a portal?"

"I guess you can say that," Sandy answered shruggingly. "I don't really know. I am just going by feel, you know?"

Jake did know and decided not to argue further. Jumping into the manhole, Jake felt like he was in the ocean again. His sphere instantly spread out, and Jake was taken aback. The stomach Jake was usually in was about the size of a large room, but this place put any aquarium on pre-system Earth to shame... shit; it put all of them put together to shame.

Jake's sphere could fully spread without him being able to see the bottom. Swimming downwards, he soon got a scope of things, and Jake estimated the entire stomach was around a kilometer deep and

spherical in shape. The bottom was covered in the eaten sand, with the walls the usual rock-like surface Jake's stomach had originally been before Sandy turned them transparent.

"This is larger than I thought," Jake said. "How many of these can you make?"

"A few, max," Sandy answered. "It drains quite a lot of energy if I want to keep the environment healthy. I also probably shouldn't keep those things in there for too long, though they do seem docile enough."

"Probably shouldn't, no," Jake agreed. It was good they were solid two out of ten in the smarts department. The one point was only given due to their teamwork. Jake wasn't sure how to feel if Sandy began abducting more intelligent species.

Jake quickly left the water stomach again and entered his own stomach. The manhole that was there remained to now give him easy access to materials. Sandy, in the outside world, could finally fly forward, albeit a bit slower than before, as the worm got used to having eaten so much stuff.

As he looked at Sandy fly, Jake could only begin to imagine what kinds of things the Cosmic Genesis Worm could do in the future. How large spaces could the worm have if they were already this spacious in C-grade? Would an S-grade Cosmic Genesis Worm have entire solar systems within its stomach?

The thought was insane but not out of the question based on what he had seen so far.

Shaking his head, Jake returned to the task at hand. He was getting better at using neurotoxins with every passing day, but more than that, Jake was now finally forming an idea of what to do. The sea urchins had given him quite the inspiration as Jake had asked himself a question... what if, instead of

trying to subtly inject the neurotoxin into the Ashen Phantom Devourer over a long period of time, he would do the exact opposite?

What if he bombarded it with ungodly amounts of neurotoxin all at once in an attack it could not avoid? For him to, metaphorically speaking, attack with a thousand smaller doses all at once?

The Fallen King focused on regenerating the severed leg as it slowly regrew. Reforming it was far more difficult than for a normal biological lifeform – if he even was one - as the Fallen King did not possess any Vitality. Or vital energies at all, for that matter. His body was not truly flesh and blood, after all.

He had fought this Ashen Phantom Devourer dozens of times by now. Every exchange ended with the other Unique Lifeform fleeing after taking significant damage. Every time he came out on top. He was winning the battles... but... losing the war.

The Fallen King had yet to fully recover for weeks now. He still had a few golden orbs remaining to recover himself, but those had been running out fast too. His issue lay in the fundamental difference between himself and the Ashen Phantom Devourer.

While he had to heal using time, the Ashen Phantom Devourer healed by being true to its namesake. It devoured other beasts in the surrounding area and dove beneath the earth to consume those who resided in the subterranean world. As a result, the other Unique Lifeform recovered slightly faster every time.

And it knew it, gladly fighting the month-long battle of attrition.

Losing a leg had been the biggest loss so far he had taken. The Fallen King had attempted to conserve resources and ended up losing the leg in the process. He knew he should have used his golden claw, but a moment of hesitation had nearly proved fatal.

Neither of them had shown any trump cards either. They simply consumed too much energy, and both knew that they risked leaving an opening. There were also some good things, such as the King now far more easily dealing damage to the Ashen Phantom Devourer and Telekinesis was now solely a defensive tool. What truly mattered was striking the soul of his foe.

Despite all this, the King was not overly worried. Alone, he would perhaps lose after a long time. Even that was uncertain as he still had his most powerful attack remaining, which should give him a high chance of at least ensuring mutual destruction. Again, this also assumed the King would even die if he was killed, considering his peculiar relationship with the hunter.

Not that the Fallen King wanted these fights to end just yet. Neither of them did. Killing the Ashen Phantom Devourer was one goal, yes, but a more important goal was proving himself superior to the other Unique Lifeform. A goal only slightly surpassing enjoying fighting a foe of equal level able to fight on equal footing with himself.

Sadly, the fight would end in due time, as the King did have one more weapon to deploy. He was a King, after all, and while he was not a subject, the little hunter was certainly someone worth having assist you.

He had spoken to the little witch already, and he was more than prepared. In fact, he was excited to see what the little hunter had cooked up.

Chapter 547 - In This Time Of Change

The days passed one by one as Earth had finally begun finding some semblance of stability. Settlements and larger cities had survived the many beasts attacking and made adequate defenses in preparation for more attacks. Some cities still fell here and there, but for the most part, there was peace.

Some smaller teleportation networks had even appeared, linking allied cities to one another. The Holy Church had some up and running relatively fast, allowing them to quickly move between their cities to assist in case of attacks. They were working towards something, and none knew exactly what it was, but it did include many high-level members of the Church making their way back to Sanctdomo - likely one of the reasons why they had rushed to re-establish a teleportation network. Out of all the factions, the Court of Shadows was perhaps the most effective, primarily with their ability to quickly not necessarily link allied cities but link locations of different networks close to each other, and then just melding in and making use of other's teleporters to move around fast.

And move fast they did. Because another source of stability was, surprisingly enough, a huge number of assassinations. Anyone who wasn't blind could see this was done with the United Cities Alliance behind the job based on how they always had a candidate ready to take control within mere hours of the current City Lord dying. Candidates who had been in the cities for months and slowly gained a following and influence.

To the surprise of many, the alien invaders that the United Cities Alliance worked with did nothing during this time. They were spotted here and there and did, in some rare instances, step in and help protect cities from attacks. Even then, no one knew what their goal was.

The faction with the biggest change was the Noboru Clan, which had been split into three separate internal factions. One of them supported the United Cities Alliance, one surprisingly wanted to join the Holy Church, and a final one wanted to stay fully independent. Some fringe members also remained, including a group who still believed the Patriarch lived.

This split led to them losing many cities to outside forces and even invading each other using non-violent methods and political scheming. They also dealt with beasts far worse, and the base of the once powerful clan was shaken. Without a singular, powerful leader to unite them, it looked as they were

headed towards collapse or, at the very least, being split into smaller factions. So far, at least no significant violence had taken place, and differences were being worked through, but it was a losing battle. Each schism simply had too different goals.

The only place that could be said to have been oddly unaffected was Haven. Even with the City Lord gone, things mostly continued as usual. People from the United Cities Alliance had come but had yet been able to take over the Pylon.

There was also the issue of Miranda having been a very popular City Lord. Surprisingly, then the majority of citizens were indifferent to the true owner of the city as he was never really around. They knew he existed, but that was the end of his involvement. Well, besides that, they did know that Miranda had been appointed by him, meaning he couldn't be that bad in their eyes.

All of these and more were the reason why the temporary City Lord had not become a member of the United City Alliance but an old leader. Phillip, the former leader of the Fort, had with reluctance agreed to take up the mantle. His reluctance was part of the reason why the United Cities Alliance agreed, and he was also generally not considered part of the Malefic's Chosen's entourage. Another reason was the understanding that it was only till an actual City Lord was deployed there.

Be it by the rightful one returning or a newcomer taking over.

Besides that, there was the Fort. A place where nothing at all had happened. There was not really a true local leader of the Fort besides Phillip in Haven, but most would look towards Arnold if they had to name one. Look towards him both figuratively and literally as a large part of the city was a metal dome that housed his personal workshop.

In the section of the world already controlled by the United Cities Alliance, it was also mostly calm. Paradise was a sore spot for many City Leaders, but none dared to challenge them, especially not after

Renato made ample use of Sylphie and Carmen both residing there. Even if saying they resided there was somewhat fallacious, considering they had not been there for a long time since leaving for the jungle to hunt.

Finally... we had some people on Earth who didn't truly know where they belonged, with this conflict only shining a brighter light on that fact.

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"You need to," the woman said in a comforting tone. "Not for anyone but yourself. You can prepare a thousand more things, but you knew this day would come eventually. You are ready, William. You say the system says you have yet to find your Path... I think this is the final piece you are missing."

William listened to Ms. Kim, his former psychiatrist, but he still felt a shiver run down his spine. He knew she was right and that she was telling him only confirmed it. He felt like she was the only person he could ever be open around, and it had been hard not seeing her for so long due to all the tasks Master had sent him to do.

"But the nightmares still haven't stopped," William muttered. "The random visions here and there..."

"Because all you have is an idea built up in your mind. He is nothing more than a concept, a representation of fear. If you confront him, you will see that reality isn't as scary as the monster your imagination has created," Ms. Kim tried to further comfort him.

With a sigh, William just nodded. Logically he knew it. The monster was not immortal or unbeatable; the alien had shown that. Even if it was not a decisive victory, he had come out on top. However, that didn't mean William would stand a chance.

"If you don't rid yourself of your fear before evolving, you risk internalizing it further, truly making it part of who you are. Is that really what you want? No one says you have to beat anyone, just that you have to confront him. I have met him, and while I do agree he is intimidating, he is, in the end, still human," Ms. Kim kept encouraging him.

William's Master had been silent, too, in this recent time. In fact, he had not spoken to William since his last conversation about being stuck at D-grade, where he had been told to figure it out himself. This had only added to his anxiety as he would at least have confidence meeting the monster if that meeting had been planned by Master.

He had done all he was told with the beasts, and they were on their own now. William had never been tasked with fighting anyone or anything during this time, and he had barely leveled his class. Not since returning from Nevermore. In Nevermore, William had killed enough to nearly reach the D-grade cap of his class and made significant progress in his profession. By all accounts, he should be ready after another long period of refining himself. Did he think he was the strongest human on Earth? No, no, he was not, but he was not that far off. The Judge of the Court was about the peak of humanity outside of that monster, and William had confidence against him.

"Okay," William finally relented.

Ms. Kim smiled. "Just remember there is no shame in retreat and that you do not go to fight. You go to confront your fears and find your Path."

William nodded again as he sighed. It wouldn't be that simple, would it?

“Ms. Kim?” William asked.

“Yes?” she asked, a bit confused by his tone.

“Thanks for everything,” he said. He knew it wasn’t true to their agreement, but he couldn’t help himself from giving her a hug. “Say hi to little Seo for me, okay? Just in case.”

Ms. Kim, to his surprise, returned his hug. “As I said... just retreat if it gets too dangerous, okay?”

She let go of him, and William also backed off.

“You are not the same person you were back then, William. You can overcome this.”

William nodded again, not entirely sure about that. Not the first point, but the second one.

Saying his goodbyes, William went towards the nearby teleporter as he appeared in a damp cavern. He felt the presence of the C-grade space jellyfish wash over him as it emerged from the water.

“You have come to a decision?” the C-grade asked him.

“Yes,” William said. “The moment that he appears send me there. No matter where or who that monster is facing.”

“So it shall be,” the C-grade agreed without arguing anything. William sat down on the ground as he meditated and prepared himself. He did not know how long it would take before the monster made his presence known, but William knew he had to go there. Not because he feared the monster would die, making him lose his chance to face him. No, that sentiment was utterly ludicrous to him.

He would go because... Ms. Kim was probably right. The monster was the reason he could not evolve, and he would have to face his fears if he wanted to prove his Path.

Days had turned to weeks as the pair of human and worm had journeyed across the ocean. One had done alchemy, and the other flew while they talked and discussed whatever sights they came across. Jake had only gotten into a single more fight, and Sandy had mainly digested what had already been eaten earlier on their trip. However... all good things must come to an end.

Sadness was in the air as the shoreline entered their sight. Jake had already been spat out of Sandy and was flying alongside the worm at a leisurely pace.

“It is beginning to hurt a bit,” Sandy said as they got closer to the shoreline. “Not actual pain, but more a warning that it will come...”

Jake nodded. They had both kind of known this would happen and had accepted it. Only a dozen of kilometers from the shoreline, Jake saw vast mountains rise, and he knew that in there the Fallen King

currently was. It was at the edge of the ocean... and the edge of what was effectively a safety zone for humanity.

The small territory humanity occupied was not much compared to the rest of the globe. Outside of that territory, there were no limitations on C-grades or anything like that, but inside there were. Jake and Sandy were approaching this safe zone where Sandy, as a C-grade, could no longer keep going.

Soon, they both stopped, just floating in the air a kilometer from the shoreline.

“Stupid system rules,” Sandy complained.

“Yeah,” Jake agreed. He really didn’t want to split from Sandy for several reasons, the first of which was that he had no way to find his wormy friend again. Sylphie he had a bond with, but Sandy was an entirely different sort of animal. A Cosmic Genesis Worm also traveled a lot around due to its nature of consuming natural treasures in insane quantities, making his C-grade pal even harder to pin down and find again.

“You gotta go?” Sandy asked. “Why not just ignore all the stupid human stuff and keep hunting? Does it really matter? Oh! We could even maybe just go somewhere else? Like, there is an entire universe to explore, right? Let’s go there! After you evolve, though...”

Jake could not help but smile. “I need to go. I have been thinking about this situation a lot, and honestly, this entire conflict is partly my fault. It is time I made a decision and finally decided. But I would be more than up for exploring with you another time, okay?”

Sandy wriggled a bit, clearly not happy. Jake just rubbed the side of the massive worm, not even sure if they could feel it. If not the physical touch, he was sure Sandy could at least feel his intentions. He honestly would like to just fly around and adventure with Sandy and even just head straight up and into space. Shit, even just exploring what was up there in the sky before reaching space would be...

Wait a fucking minute.

“Hey, Sandy... you wanna try something?” Jake asked with a grin.

“What?” Sandy asked, perking up a little.

Jake looked towards the sky. “See if this damn restriction has a vertical limit.”

Sandy took a moment to comprehend what he meant before getting it. Jake barely had a chance to react before the massive worm bent its body and chomped down on him. As he didn’t resist, he was thrown into the old room again, as outside, the surroundings were already moving.

The water below was getting further away as the clouds above approached with alarming speed, as it was time to see how far they could go. Jake assumed that a long cylinder of restricted space didn’t just extend endlessly out of Earth, and he had already seen that the restrictions lessened the deeper you went into the ground, so why should it not be the same when heading upwards?

“I will admit it is a creature I have not seen before,” the scaled god said with skepticism. “But that does not mean much when they are still in C-grade. For such special beasts, I can see many Paths that only result in death.”

“Very insightful,” Vilastromoz said with a smirk. “You know, I thought something similar once upon a time when I stumbled across this incredibly stupid lizard with a few too many heads rolling around in a swamp. Turns out that lizard became this little lizard became a slightly smarter lizard with way too many heads. Oh, and a god or something.”

“Master...” Snappy – or the Lord Protector as some liked to call him – said with exasperation and slight embarrassment. “I am simply saying that it is a gamble that I am uncertain of if I should take. There are risks involved, you know that. You chose to make a bet because the human truly was extraordinary, but this creature is not in the same realm as him.”

“I would never force you to do anything like this,” the Viper did agree. “But I am saying that I see potential. I have never come across a creature like this before either, and from what it has displayed so far, even you must admit you are impressed. And... getting in on the ground floor, especially before some other god swoops in, is a good idea. The worm is hidden by Jake’s Shroud due to its current proximity to him, but that may very well change. If you act now and your gamble succeeds, the gains will be that much better.”

Snappy fell silent for a bit, with Villy just staring at him. He had made the Lord Protector observe all his recorded memories of the worm – perfect photographic memory and the ability to playback those memories being a perk of his Bloodline. That is what his old friend had done over the last few days as he evaluated the worm.

As for why Vilastromoz was having Snappy do it? Because his Path was more closely aligned with the worm than the Viper’s own. The Path of consumption and devouring all in his Path was far more like Snappy than the very selective Viper.

“Perhaps,” Snappy sighed, “perhaps it has been too long since I had one of my own, and in this time of change, perhaps taking a bit of a risk is only right.”

Vilastromoz failed to hold back a smile. He truly did not believe his old friend would regret it.

Chapter 548 - All Hail Sandy

They had just made it above the clouds as Jake felt a ping by Villy. "Hey, Jake, can I borrow you for a second?"

"Sure, what's up?" he asked.

"No, I mean in a more literal sense. Can I borrow your body to do something?"

"I guess?" Jake kind of agreed.

"Great!"

Jake felt the Viper descend. It was like Jake's aura got mixed with something else, and he then felt a third presence enter, confusing him even more. At that moment, was very happy that he had a strong soul before he felt the sheer level of pressure upon it as he channeled but a fraction of the Viper's aura. Sandy also noticed as the worm stopped in mid-air before asking him in a confused tone.

"Uhm, I just got some weird pop-up, and I think it might be a scam?"

“What is it?” Jake asked curiously, soldiering through. Had Villy decided to bless Sandy? That would actually be awesome, and he was mentally slapping himself for not having thought of giving the worm one earlier.

“You see, I got this Blessing thing offered like you have, right?” Sandy asked with doubt.

“Yeah?” Jake asked. So it was Villy giving a ble-

“And... well, I just feel like if you have to include that something is True in the description, isn’t that kind of red flag that it isn’t? Like, if it is real, why do you need to put so much emphasis on it you know?”

Wait, what? Jake asked himself, utterly perplexed at what Sandy was asking. Include True? Did it maybe say something about it coming from someone with a True Blessing?

“Can you explain what it says in detail?” Jake asked Sandy.

“Okay, it asks if I want to talk to this god or something about receiving a True Blessing? It is very weird,” Sandy answered.

Jake, even more confused, asked: “What is the name of this god?”

“The Boundless Hydra.”

Who the fuck is that? Jake asked himself for a moment before a lightbulb went off. Sandy: likes eating stuff. Snappy: likes eating stuff. It all suddenly made sense; they were a match made in heaven.

“Hey, Villy, is Snappy really offering Sandy his True Blessing?” Jake asked the Viper.

“Yes, but an emphasis on offer. It will be up to them to reach an agreement if your wormy friend agrees to a conversation on the topic,” Villy explained. “You will have to function as a conduit during this process, and it will be a bit straining, but you should be fine.”

Jake nodded, totally fine with that, before talking to Sandy: “Yep, I know who the Boundless Hydra is. The offering is a True Blessing, the same as what I have but from a different god. I would recommend for you to have this talk with the guy, okay?”

“Oh, okay,” Sandy agreed. “As long as it isn’t a scam.”

Villy’s presence intensified as Jake felt the god channel power through him. He allowed it all to go through as he got a slight headache. Jake closed his eyes as Sandy had also completely frozen in the real world as the Hydra and Cosmic Genesis Worm spoke.

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Snappy had disappeared and returned to his own realm for the conversation. Forever true to tradition and all that. Then again, giving a True Blessing could not be done the usual way. The two souls had to

meet as the transference was more intimate and intense than any other Blessing. Doing it in the divine realm of a god was the easiest for both parties.

Vilastromoz smirked as he wondered what kind of monster he was helping to create.

Worm and Hydra met.

The Lord Protector – also known as the Boundless Hydra – had assumed his true form. A mass of heads too difficult for a mortal mind to comprehend appeared before the insignificantly small Cosmic Genesis Worm. The Hydra soon collected its form to only be a nine-headed hydra.

Two figures simply existed for a few seconds before the worm opened its mouth and began sucking.

“This place tastes weird.”

“You are within my divine realm, and what you are consuming is my energy. I am known as the Boundless Hydra, Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper,” the Hydra spoke.

“Wow!” Sandy said, impressed. “That is such a long name! I am just Sandy, pleased to meet you, the Boundless Hydra, Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper.”

Silence followed as neither spoke for a period after. Sandy just sucked in some more of the atmosphere and looked around, clearly unsure how to act or what to do. The Hydra, on the other hand, just observed.

“Tell me, Sandy. Why do you travel with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?” the Hydra asked the worm after a few minutes.

“What a silly question,” Sandy scoffed. “We’re friends!”

“That is now. The Chosen of the Malefic One will keep walking a Path of conquest and power. He will grow in power without end, and his true stage is not your small planet but the multiverse as a whole. Are you willing to follow him that far? Are you willing to do what is necessary to remain someone useful to him even as he soars towards the apex?” the Boundless Hydra asked.

“What do you mean when you say do what is necessary? I am just doing what I do. I eat stuff, grow and get stronger and better at eating stuff. I am not doing that to be useful to him; that would be super silly, wouldn’t it?” Sandy asked in return.

“Does that mean that you intend to abandon the Malefic’s Chosen if you find it convenient?” the ancient god asked the mortal worm.

“Maybe? Who knows? We are friends, and Jake says that friends don’t owe each other anything. They help because they want to, not because they have to. Also! I remember him once saying never say never, so I am never going to say never. Wait, I did just say never a lot of times... anyway! Jake is my friend, so that is that. Stop talking about silly stuff like abandoning others. If anything, he was the one about to abandon me just now!” Sandy said with much gusto, not a shred of fear within the worm.

The Hydra fell silent for a few seconds, seeming to contemplate the answer. "Would you give your life for the Malefic's Chosen?"

"No, I am pretty sure that would kill me, and I wouldn't like that."

"If you are given the choice of betraying and backstabbing the Malefic's Chosen for a tremendously powerful treasure, would you do it?"

"That sounds like a dumb thing to do and also super impractical. How do I even stab him when all my teeth are gone?" Sandy perfectly answered. "Also! I am pretty sure I wouldn't be able to stab him in the back even if I had teeth. He is mega good at knowing when something is trying to hit him from behind."

"Do you ever think you will be sated? When will you be satisfied with devouring treasures? Is it truly a Path you want to follow for eternity? A never-ending cycle of consumption?" the Hydra kept questioning.

"Maybe not? Sometimes I also like to lay around and digest and stuff. But after that, I will definitely need to head out for a snack. Why would someone not want to keep eating stuff? Eating stuff is the best. Oh! And I can even find different ways of eating things, like making food-making stomachs and stuff by eating living things! That is infinite food right there. Doesn't sound boring at all," Sandy once more answered without hesitation.

"Now! Why are you the only one asking me questions? So, why are you called the Boundless Hydra? Did you use to be bound or something?" Sandy asked.

“My Path was similar to yours, and in my pursuit of power, I expanded every part of myself and grew. We Hydras tend to be more powerful the more heads we have, and my goal was to reach the apex. Turns out the apex is realizing there is no limit, only one’s abilities holding one back,” the Lord Protector answered truthfully.

“Cool! I am fine with only one head, though,” Sandy made clear.

“I would assume as much. But we do share the Path of consumption, even if there are differences. Nevertheless, my Records do compliment yours. So, finally... would you, Sandy, the Cosmic Genesis Worm, have the honor of becoming my Chosen?” the Lord Protector asked the C-grade worm.

“Chosen... oh! Like Jake and his friend Villy!? Yeah, we can totally be friends if you want to! You seem like an okay Hydra.”

“Friends... yes, you can view it as that,” the Lord Protector chose not to argue. “With it will come responsibility and power. It will allow you to go further, but should you fall, it will, in turn, harm me. It is both a responsibility and a privilege. You will come to possess an Identity that will be recognized in the wider multiverse too. It is truly no decision to make lightly,” the Hydra made very clear.

“Sounds like a lot of things just for becoming your friend, but I guess all that stuff is fine. Though, actually, can you explain it all a bit better? Jake did also mention that only idiots don’t properly take their time to understand an agreement before accepting it. That is how you get scammed, and I am not here to get scammed. So! Details, please?” Sandy did ask, showing a bit of doubt for the first time.

“Gladly,” the Hydra answered in a pleased tone.

Jake felt damn weird; no two ways about it. He felt his body flooded with the two presences as Sandy's body had gone entirely limp. He instinctively knew their soul had been projected elsewhere, probably into the realm of Snappy.

Considering Jake was unable to move or do anything, he just had to ask Villy how things were doing.

"So, are those two having a nice chat?" Jake asked the snake god.

"That is between them, and not even I can forcefully listen in. Sure, Snappy would just allow me to, but I won't," Villy answered. "But I will share a bit. You are probably wondering why Snappy is suddenly here talking about giving away a True Blessing. Snappy has not given out his True Blessing for many Eras by now; he has barely given any Blessings out, in fact. Firstly it is not really part of his Path, and secondly, there is risk and responsibility tied to having blessed ones out there. Snappy has been cooped up in the Order ever since I went into seclusion, and I believe it's high time he begins to get a bit more out there."

"Doesn't exactly explain why you want him to give out a True Blessing, especially not why Sandy would be a good candidate. Like, I see it kind of, but have you not talked repeatedly about how giving a True Blessing is a huge commitment?" Jake asked.

"It is, which is why I am not the one deciding if he chooses to bless the worm, and he may just decide on only giving a lower-level Blessing. What I did suggest to him was that maybe the worm was worth gambling on. So yes, it is a massive gamble, but one I think is worth taking for him. Plus, it will give him a stronger connection to the outside world," Villy explained.

"I guess," Jake semi-agreed.

He had to admit it, but... Sandy was not exactly the kind of being Jake thought of when someone mentioned a Chosen. Not that he was, either.

“Think positively, with any Blessing from Snappy, that worm will gain a huge boon,” Villy said. “Okay, finally, I will admit that I want to see what exactly a Cosmic Genesis Worm can turn into as it grows in power. It is an interesting beast and one I think can be useful to you for a long time if it can keep up with you. A True Blessing from someone like Snappy will help with that tremendously. More than that, the guidance of the Boundless Hydra would prove invaluable.”

“As long as Sandy also wants it,” Jake said.

“Jake, you are the only one I know that cannot renounce a Blessing, and also the only one I know who would not instantly jump at the opportunity of a True Blessing. Anyway, the worm can just choose to throw it away if it turns out to be something they don’t want,” Villy reminded him. “The bond between a Chosen and their god is not one of equals but is closer to that than any other Blessing.”

The two of them didn’t get much more time to speak before Jake felt a change. The presence of Snappy intensified to an entirely new level, forcing Jake to metaphorically grit his teeth. It was as if his insides were burning, and the epicenter of this presence was Sandy.

Seconds passed before it subsided, and Jake felt Villy and Snappy both retract their auras as Villy spoke in a joking tone. “All hail Sandy, Chosen of the Boundless Hydra, the Devourer of Dimensions.”

Jake did not pay it mind but instead focused on Sandy. The first thing he noticed was how the worm’s aura had changed. Grown. Not by a small margin either, but significant growth. Jake knew this had to be the titles added by being blessed, along with the bonuses of the Blessing itself.

“So... Sandy, how are you feeling?” Jake asked the worm.

“Huh? Oh, hey there, Jake! That was so wild but also kind of fun. I made a new friend with the super big Hydra guy, and we agreed that I would get Blessed by him and stuff, so now I am a Chosen too! Isn’t that cool?” Sandy asked with glee.

“Moreover! I am faster and even more durable now! I got boosts in all stats, and my tummy ache is entirely gone after that. Definitely a nice Hydra.”

Jake felt genuinely happy for his wormy friend but had one burning question in his mind.

“You also got a skill, right?”

“Yep!”

“Great. If you don’t mind me asking, what rarity is it? And could you tell me what it does, at least for me to get an idea?” Jake asked. He knew it was a lot to ask, but he was damn curious. Jake had a strong feeling there existed a rarity beyond mythical but below divine, and he wasn’t sure if Sandy would get a Divine skill as Snappy was no Primordial.

“The skill is divine, and as for what it does...” Sandy said, really dragging it out for dramatic purposes.

“Yes?” Jake asked, prompting the worm.

“It does so that...”

Jake felt like smashing something.

“...I can not tell you what it does!” Sandy said in a loud and cheerful tone.

“What?” Jake asked.

“Yep, my new friend told me not to tell anyone. So, sorry. Your fault for telling me that friends have to keep promises,” Sandy said, still annoyingly cheerful.

It was not a discussion Jake wanted to take up as there was no winning. Instead, he would focus on moving forward. Or, well, upwards.

“Well, anyway, that was a nice little intermission to our journey,” Jake said, changing the topic entirely. “Are you ready to truly go and explore what resides in the upper layers of our planet’s sky and hopefully allow us to travel together for a bit longer?”

“Yeah, that was definitely a fun time,” Sandy agreed. “And also, yeah, let’s go! Oh, but one thing first.”

Sandy spat Jake out as he appeared a bit confused in the real world. Sandy then seemed to focus before spitting out a small sphere that looked like a mix between stone and metal, giving off odd energy. It was about the size of Jake himself, and he could only stare at it with bewilderment. Especially as it contained Sandy's presence, meaning it was part of the worm.

"Can you keep that with you? It can go in your spatial storage," Sandy asked.

"What is it?" Jake asked.

"I made a promise not to tell, but I need you to keep it safe, and it will be super useful even when I can't follow, okay?"

Jake stared at the stone and shook his head as he stored the item that was clearly a product of the newly gained divine rarity skill.

Chapter 549 - Strategizing

Vilastromoz grinned as he waited for Snappy to return. Genuinely, he hadn't been sure if Snappy would actually give his True Blessing to the worm. He had gone with the tried and tested strategy of starting with the most extreme example of a Blessing while only expecting a Divine Blessing. A Greater Blessing also wouldn't have been that off from his expectations.

He would lie if he said it didn't please him. Then again, Snappy was better at judging the abilities of the Cosmic Genesis Worm than the Viper was. As mentioned, then while they both walked Paths where consumption was a big part of it, Snappy walked one where eating things was the primary element. If Villy was a master, then Snappy was a grand master.

As expected, Snappy returned soon after handing out the Blessing, looking a bit worse for wear. Giving out a True Blessing was never easy, and it quite literally ate your Records when you did it. If giving out a normal Blessing – even a Divine one – could be said to consume a limited resource pool, then giving away a True Blessing was giving away a portion of your maximum energy pool with the hope that the one you gave the pool to would improve the maximum. That, or die too early, making you permanently lose a portion of this pool that you would then have to make up for. Losing a single Chosen prematurely was a significant loss, even if it wouldn't necessarily result in any loss of combat prowess.

What it would do in every case was limit the potential of a god and make it harder for them to progress. In the same way, then if the Chosen did well, it would also help the god. Records mixed, too, giving other benefits. While Jake enjoyed plenty of the Viper's Records, then Vilastromoz too enjoyed the Records of Jake's achievements. The exchange was not equal but heavily favored for the Chosen, at least in the lower grades. What an S-grade did simply resulted in more meaningful Records for a god than nearly anything a D or even C-grade could possibly achieve.

This was why most gods waited to A or S-grade to make someone a Chosen. The chance of the person dying then was just lower, and one would nearly always get their investment returned. Especially as many gods hoped for the ultimate bounty of their Chosen reaching godhood, resulting in not only a huge return on investment but a new loyal god joining them in their factions.

However... the gains from someone you blessed even earlier on their Path reaching these levels of power were nothing compared to what the Viper would get from Jake. While the Viper had made Jake his Chosen rather impulsively, it wasn't as if he had done so without any thought.

"Had an enlightening conversation with the Cosmic Genesis Worm?" Vilastromoz asked Snappy.

"Moreso than expected," Snappy answered. "I must admit, I had not expected the level of presence resistance to be that high. It went above and beyond anything I have seen of any C-grade before. A result of your Chosen, I believe?"

“Yep,” Vilastromoz confirmed. “This is that Sylphian Hawk all over again, though slightly less potent as far as I can tell.”

“Sandy was still affected,” Snappy agreed. “Just able to ignore it far better. Stoic is not the word I would use, but perhaps willfully ignorant is more accurate.”

Vilastromoz nodded, having his thoughts reaffirmed. “So, what made you decide to give the True Blessing?”

Snappy was silent for a moment. “No singular factor was behind it. However, I had feared that Sandy would have been bound to your Chosen too tightly and not have enough independence. It was good to have it confirmed that is not the case. Moreover, as the Cosmic Genesis Worm was in my realm, I could feel its conceptual level of digestion and analyze how their inner world works.”

“And?”

“I found it acceptable to make Sandy my Chosen,” Snappy simply said with a smile. “The worm also had an acceptable personality and demeanor.”

Vilastromoz also smiled and shook his head. “Keep your secrets, then. Though I must add, I am surprised Sandy could get the divine skill you chose to give. As far as I know, the compability requirements are through the roof on that one.”

Snappy sighed. “How do you already know?”

Villy just kept smiling as he kept an eye on Jake and the worm. "Happy thoughts. At least you don't have to be that worried about Sandy dying to any unforeseen circumstances now."

When Jake thought about it, he had never actually gone that far into the sky. The furthest he had gone was with Hawkie while exploring the cloud continent, and that had still been in the lower layers of the world above. He had, for a long time, theorized one could find many powerful things up there, and that theory was soon proven true.

Earth had several layers of clouds, and entering each layer was like entering an entirely new world. Clouds above and below made it look like one was within a cave of clouds in the sky, and as Jake and Sandy entered one of the extremely far-up layers, Sandy suddenly stopped to shudder.

"This place is good," the worm said.

"Really?" Jake asked rhetorically with delight. "That is great! Now see if you can move to the side too. Towards the west, that is."

They still needed to make sure Sandy could actually enter the airspace above where the Fallen King was before they could call this a success.

However, Jake had a strong feeling it would be fine. This feeling primarily stemmed from the many beasts already in the area to the west, and far in the distance, Jake saw something extremely large move. So large it had to be C-grade.

As he had hoped, Sandy encountered no more problems but made it clear that going downward through any of the cloud layers was not an option. Jake asked Sandy to spit him out, and the worm did so.

Standing in the air outside, Jake stared downwards.

They were approximately two hundred kilometers from the surface of the planet. The cloud continent had been around twenty-five kilometers from the surface, so he was now around eight times higher, which made sense considering the presence of C-grades there.

"I guess we will have to say goodbye too... I can't follow you down from here," Sandy said with some sadness.

"Wait a bit," Jake said as he kept looking down and focusing.

He squinted his eyes and strained himself. Faint traces of stamina entered his eyes to empower them. In his vision, the layers of clouds thinned, turning into only a faint mist. Focusing more, the mist began dispersing as layer after layer disappeared, and a mountain valley entered his eyes.

And people laughed at full Perception builds, Jake smiled to himself. Okay, no one had really laughed about his stat build to his face, but plenty of people probably wanted to!

Looking around, Jake soon spotted what he was looking for. A mountain peak with gold on top – the residence of the Fallen King. It was a bit far off to the side, though, but he had time to get in position. Nothing was going on all the way below as far as he could see, meaning no fight was happening.

"What are you looking at?" Sandy finally asked.

"The mountains below to figure out the best spot to prepare," Jake answered.

"You can see all the way down there?" Sandy asked with confusion. "That is like super far, isn't it? And isn't all the stuff in the way annoying?"

"It is, but I can handle it. I also think I may have to go a bit lower while I prepare as I don't want any C-grades to interrupt me," Jake answered.

"So it is goodbye..." Sandy said with sadness. "Oh well, I guess nothing can be done about that."

Jake frowned a bit as the last part sounded far less sad than the first. It took him a moment, but he got it. "You detected something tasty?"

"Maaaybe? The sky is way better than the water, that is for damn sure," Sandy said cheerfully. "But do say hi again when you are done dealing with human stuff, okay? Just take the egg- I mean, rock-thing, I gave you earlier and infuse some energy into it, and I will come if I can."

Jake smiled as he patted his wormy friend. "I will. See you around, Sandy, and happy hunting. Treasure hunting, that is."

“You too! Good luck killing stuff and all that, and I hope that weird stuff you prepared works. Unique Lifeforms sound scary,” Sandy also said their goodbyes.

With those words, Sandy left to do wormy adventures of their own. Jake would lie if he said he wouldn't miss the giant gluttonous worm, but such was life. At least he now had a method of contact, and even if he didn't, then he could at least contact his fellow Chosen through Villy.

Yes, it still felt weird that Sandy was now a Chosen of an extremely powerful god and that there was absolutely no change in the worm despite that. Not that he complained, as he preferred it that way. He did wonder what that entire egg business was about, as that wasn't something Sandy could do before, meaning it definitely came from the skill granted by the True Blessing.

This meant the egg had to come from a divine skill, even if it felt rather mundane. Villy had said that no combat-oriented skills could be given, but that didn't mean Jake had any idea what the worm had gotten. I guess I will find out at some point. For now, let's focus on the task at hand.

Jake dove downwards for a good while until reaching around the hundred-kilometer mark. He timed himself and estimated he would be able to reach the ground in around two minutes if he went at full speed. This put his speed somewhere around two and three times the speed of sound, closer to three.

Taking some more notes, Jake scoured the mountain range below, waiting for something to happen. As he did this, he also took out a token and activated it. A minute passed before he felt Miranda make contact.

Miranda had activated the ritual circle to establish a connection with Jake, and it formed effortlessly.

"I am in position around a hundred kilometers above the mountain range now. I have visual contact with where the King resides," Jake said, surprising Miranda a bit. Not only with how fast he had gotten there, but that he was so far up in the sky.

"Is that within feasible striking distance?" Miranda asked with doubt.

"Yes," Jake simply answered.

She did not even try to argue it. Jake knew far better than she did when it came to these kinds of things. "Very well, I will now form the three-way connection. Wait a minute."

Miranda quickly took out a few more items that she placed on the circle. Pouring her mana in and controlling the ritual, a second connection was formed. Focusing, Miranda took these connections and channeled them first through herself and then into the circle as he connected them all with herself as the central medium.

"It has been a while since we last spoke, little hunter," a voice spoke to not only Miranda but everyone else part of the ritual. Jake being everyone else in this case.

"That it has," Jake agreed. "I hear you have been struggling with some ash guy or something? Do you mean to tell me that this other Unique Lifeform is superior to you?"

"Superior is a strong word to describe a creature of equal class. That neither of us can kill the other is only a testament to the power of Unique Lifeforms," the King scoffed.

“Sure, a testament to their power. I guess to take down such a powerful foe, you need an expert in killing Unique Lifeforms. I guess I can consult, considering my vast experience on the subject?” Jake teased.

“I must disappoint you; I sadly do not have several system-granted items to make this Unique Lifeform weak enough for you to stand a chance.”

“Too bad, guess we will have to just kill it the old-fashioned way then, huh? Oh wait, you also tried that and failed? Damn,” Jake said.

“Boys, be nice to each other,” Miranda finally cut in to mediate the two bickering... eh... peak powerhouses of Earth? The peak of D-grade, at least. Anyway.

“Jake is in position now in the air far above the mountain range. Am I correct to assume that both of you are ready to engage the next time the Unique Lifeform shows up?” Miranda asked.

“Yes,” the King answered.

“I would prefer to wait until the time after that. You say it comes by often... make it so that this time is shorter than the others. Make it believe you are truly struggling and soon unable to keep up. You already said you are slowly losing out; make it believe you are truly at your limit. Then make it retreat, fully heal up, and return for the killing blow,” Jake said without a hint of teasing, surprising Miranda a bit at his patience. She had assumed he wanted to rush in.

“Why the delay?” the King asked, no longer joking around either.

“For me to properly assess the Unique Lifeform and make use of some of my skills. Will it be a problem to do this?” Jake asked. This was no jab but a genuine inquiry.

“Yes, it should be feasible. I have been facing mounting pressure recently, and I can play it up,” the King answered.

“Alright,” Miranda agreed. “Allow me to contact and bring in the final member of this little plan.”

Miranda had already prepared as the two spoke and activated yet another token. She repeated the process from before and had to sacrifice quite the energy to facilitate what was essentially a group call. The old man she wanted to bring in had been waiting and nearly instantly reacted.

“Greetings, Ms. Wells, Jake, and... the Fallen King, is it?” the Sword Saint spoke as he too took part in their little strategy meeting.

“Well met, swordsman,” the King greeted.

“Hi there,” Jake also said hello.

"I am glad you could join us," Miranda finished. Channeling the presences of four people in a ritual like this wasn't easy, especially not considering the distance between some of them and her having to make sure the connection was secure.

"I take it the time is approaching?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Yes, we are soon ready and want to make sure you are in position and able to engage when called upon," Miranda asked the Sword Saint.

"You need not worry; I am ready. Simply say when," the Sword Saint confirmed.

"Great. Jake, if you would explain your plan of engagement to the others?" Miranda asked.

"Okay, so I thought that--"

Jake went on to explain as Miranda just listened in and focused on the ritual. The King asked a few questions as he was the only other one directly involved in the fight with the other Unique Lifeform, with the Sword Saint more there to offer advice. Jake also gave the Sword Saint some tips as they all knew the old man would have potentially the most dangerous job of all:

Keeping Ell'Hakan busy during the takedown of the Ashen Phantom Devourer.

It took in total about half an hour to go over everything, and by then, Miranda was also plenty tired. They said their goodbyes, and, with relief, she disengaged from the ritual and let it fade. Not having the energy to clean the circle then and there, she went to relax in another room and found a certain snake sitting by the door.

“It went well?” the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake asked.

“As expected,” Miranda just answered. “What about you? Have you decided on a name yet?”

“No... it is too hard. But I thought, what if we combine them?”

Miranda was a bit surprised, but after thinking about it, it wasn't a bad idea. Allie Scarlett or Scarlett Allie. Maybe make it Allison, or-

“How about Scallie to-“

Miranda instantly raised her hand, making the snake shut up. “Back to the drawing board on that one.”

Chapter 550 - Assessment & Preparation

Jake spent the next day or so refining and making more of the poison that he would use to take down the Unique Lifeform as he waited for it to appear below. It took about twenty-six hours before Jake spotted the Ashen Phantom Devourer move roughly a hundred kilometers below himself.

Its form was truly massive, and to Jake, it looked like the sandstorm he had seen in the desert but made of ash and not sand. Without knowing better, he would not even have thought it a living creature. Black ash simply swept across the mountains as if a strong wind carried it. As it approached the residence of the Fallen King, the ash began to condense itself into a vaguely humanoid form a bit more than five meters tall.

The figure raised a long log-like arm as space seemed to distort. A giant bullet of ash was collected that was fired out of the domain and towards the residence of the King. The King responded as a barrier appeared, and the Unique Lifeform emerged.

Ash can leave the area, forcing it to generate more, Jake quickly concluded as more ash just seemed to appear within the domain. Focusing, he tried to look deeper and get a feeling for what he was facing. His high Perception had already allowed him to look past the clouds that blocked out his vision, but now he wanted to see something not visible to the naked eye.

The domain of the Unique Lifeform was its Soulshape, which meant it had to leave something there. Some part of itself, at least in the metaphysical realm. Usually, Jake saw the Soulshape of a creature by relying on the poison running through their bodies and using Sense of the Malefic Viper. However, in this case, he could not feasibly poison the Unique Lifeform to do this without it discovering his presence.

According to him, the King could see the full body of the Ashen Phantom Devourer. His sight was not the same as that of a human's but far more magical in nature, and Sandy could likely also have sensed the body of the Unique Lifeform. The environment it occupied simply had to be different in some way, even if it was not currently within his visible spectrum.

The human eye had limitations. Examples were such as how it could not see infrared or ultraviolet light and overall had a relatively narrow spectrum of wavelength visible to it. Probably a good thing, too, as being able to see outside of it would be a miserable experience considering all the wavelengths in the air at all times stemming from phone signals, radio waves, the internet, and whatnot. Yet humans had found ways to still see these things. Measure them using devices to translate them into something humans could see and understand.

Jake had none of such measurement devices, and post-system, they likely wouldn't even work either. What he did have was a superhuman body and Perception above anything a D-grade human should ever have. He could see mana of different affinities, use tracking to detect things that weren't truly there, and even adapt and get used to these things, such as when he got used to dark mana. So why should he not be able to also see outside of the visual spectrum of humans and see the metaphysical? Gaze of the Apex Hunter already allowed him to "see" his opponent's soul based on the description, and that skill had permanently modified his eyes to allow this. Shit, at times, he felt like he had seen someone's soul, such as when he tried to get around Identify protection.

At this point, it was no longer just a theory that he could do it but a conviction that he simply hadn't found the proper method.

The battle below continued as the two powerful entities crashed repeatedly. The Fallen King purposefully played it defensively and blocked most attacks with his powerful telekinesis while allowing the weaker blows to merely fizzle out upon encountering his barrier.

Ash formed into different shapes appeared to be the primary method of attack deployed by the Ashen Phantom Devourer, but Jake quickly saw it wasn't that simple. The ash was not simply compressed but layered in odd ways. A single spear of ash looked like it was made of obsidian, making it far more condensed than what made sense. To add on, the ash could also change shape even when in flight, and rather than fly straight, it often seemed to teleport.

Because it did teleport.

Another thing the King had already mentioned was the ash's ability to not only do damage but multiply by itself. Jake was not entirely certain what affinities ash existed of, but he assumed it had to do with fire of some kind. Now that he observed it in action, he became more and more certain of one thing that also made the Phantom part of the Unique Lifeform's name make sense.

Dark mana. The ash is heavily infused with dark mana, Jake concluded. The dark mana materialized as the ash consumed the mana of the King whenever they clashed, and a reason why ash constantly filled the huge domain was due to the Unique Lifeform absorbing energy from outside into its territory at all times.

Every particle of ash also had dark mana within, absorbing some of the King's simply by passively touching his barrier. This dark mana appeared weaker than its space and ash magic and pretty much only included the assimilation parts of the dark affinity. From Jake's initial assessment, the King was superior in both power and resources, but the Devourer won out in durability and endurance.

Not that either of them wasn't considered pinnacle creatures, even in their weak areas.

The more Jake understood his opponent, the more he knew what he was looking for. Focusing, he began to see an outline. Following that path, the outline turned entirely black as huge parts of the mountain range suddenly got covered in complete darkness.

It was... massive. Jake knew this was the true body of the Unique Lifeform, and he now also knew he had severely underestimated the size of his foe. It truly was nearly as large as the C-grade whale had been, but he also saw something different. Its size shrank whenever it launched attacks to then grow in between attacking or defending.

Size represented by resources remaining, Jake then also concluded.

The entire domain could also naturally move. The King retreated out of it several times, and that was when Jake noted down one more crucial aspect. It moved using physical ash. In order to move the

domain, the ash had to “push” the perimeter of the domain by flying in the direction the Unique Lifeform wanted to go, meaning that a physical barrier would obstruct it. Jake breathed out a sigh of relief upon realizing this as that ruled out the Unique Lifeform fleeing below the ground by simply moving its domain downward.

Jake kept refining his vision as the dark blob began to become more transparent. He then began to see that light also refracted here and there within the domain whenever space magic was deployed, and more ash appeared.

Golden light and waves of pure force met ash as the two Unique Lifeforms fought, leaving the entire area broken and destroyed - even more than it already was. The King’s golden attacks seemed to do significant damage to the Ashen Phantom Devourer whenever ash was destroyed, and sometimes the entire domain seemed to move in order to try and avoid attacks. However, more often, the other Unique Lifeform moved to block. At nearly all times, it also kept a figure condensed somewhere, and Jake also realized the reason for this.

It needs a focal point of energy. Like a catalyst at the center of a ritual circle, condensing a body allows it to focus its energy into a single entity to then further condense and launch attacks.

Another potential weakness. Destroying this condensed body would do more damage than striking anywhere else, as it contained more energy than anywhere else. If the Unique Lifeform had been C-grade, it could likely have made far more of these forms or perhaps not had to at all, but as things were, this was a limitation in its abilities.

The entire battle between the Unique Lifeforms ended up taking around an hour. After an hour, the King began to launch larger and larger attacks, damaging the Devourer more and more. Yet it also left him open, and the Devourer struck and tore off some of his natural bark-like armor and smashed the King back several times.

Yet just as the King looked like he was about to unleash some final attack, the Ashen Phantom Devourer simply retreated. The domain moved away the same way it had come, and Jake stared after it as he saw it reach a large hole in the ground more than fifty kilometers from the King. When it reached the hole, the entire domain shrank and entered. The domain was only about sixty to seventy percent of its regular size at that point, too, visualizing the damage it had taken. It had clearly gone to absorb more energy again and return at full power, while Jake could see the King had taken far more damage and would need longer to heal.

A good strategy if you are not in a rush and play it safe... too bad it read the situation wrong.

Jake took out his token again, and as he saw the King retreat to his residence, the connection was formed.

"Hey Miranda, that was fast. So, how you holding up down there?" Jake asked the King

"As predicted. The Ashen Phantom Devourer should estimate that I am at about half resources now, and by the time it fully recovers, I would barely be able to reach around sixty to sixty-five percent. I used my boosting skill liberally this time around to appear more desperate too. In reality, I can consume a few Soul Marbles, and I should be back to over eighty percent. Before you ask, potions do not help; besides, potions barely work on Unique Lifeforms. My guess is that the Devourer shall return within the next twelve hours in an attempt to finish me off. In fact, I think it wanted this battle to be the last but decided to retreat to fully secure the kill without being harmed too much itself."

Jake nodded. "Twelve hours is plenty enough time. Miranda, be ready to inform the Sword Saint. I will eat my bow if that orange bastard doesn't have some method of coming to help fast, so we need the old man on his toes."

“Of course,” Miranda agreed. “I will leave you to your preparations now. Neil has also prepared, and if everything goes as hoped, we should be able to also return to Haven promptly.”

Jake once again nodded. “I have a good feel for what this Ashen Phantom Devourer can do now, and I believe it will be in for quite the surprise. You have confidence in fulfilling your part even with your injuries?”

The last part was naturally asked of the King.

“More than ready,” the King responded confidently.

“Very well. See you when the Ashen Phantom Devourer arrives. I will prick your soul when I engage. Jake, over and out.”

With that, the conversation ended, and nothing more needed to be said. All that was needed now was execution, and Jake had twelve hours to make sure everything was perfect. Luckily, he had already done most of these preparations by creating the one crucial factor to make their strategy work:

A working neurotoxin.

Due to the lack of time, Jake had not held back when it came to using ingredients. Jake had sought deep and taken out everything he had stored and bought from all around. He had experimented a lot and found one ingredient that mixed incredibly well with the kind of toxin he wanted to make. It was an old gift from his little brother.

[Umbral Lotus Leaf (Ancient)] – The leaf of a legendary rarity Umbral Lotus. This leaf is incredibly poisonous and releases dark-affinity mana all around it. Consuming it may lead to adverse effects. Many alchemical uses and creations will have neurotoxin and perception-limiting effects.

Jake had kind of forgotten he even had the lotus leaves. As he didn't have enough of them to actually experiment, Jake had one in Palate since the day he began working on the neurotoxin and instead used lesser dark mana poisons. His control of dark mana proved invaluable during this process and allowed him to get better far faster than expected.

The second ingredient was naturally the Lifeblood.

[Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin (Ancient)] – The Lifeblood of a slain Emperor Urchin, an incredibly poisonous creature only found in areas with extremely dense water affinity. Its very blood is toxic to consume and especially toxic if directly injected. The Lifeblood is of a neurotoxin nature. Has many alchemical uses and is especially potent when combined with other neurotoxins or poisons with the water affinity.

Then, for a third ingredient, he also pulled out something he hadn't really ever made use of. A reward from the entrance-exam dungeon of the Academy in the Order.

[Refined Manticore Stinger (Epic)] – the refined stinger of a high-tier D-grade Manticore. The venom within is now more powerful than ever, even compared to when it was alive. This toxin is of the earth affinity and will petrify anything it comes into contact with. Slowly produces more venom when infused with appropriate energy. Has many alchemical uses.

Jake had carried it around with him for a long time, producing plenty of venom passively during this time. He had found that only natural passive mana seemed to work with it, meaning Jake could not

infuse it himself... but Sandy could. So, Sandy had been nice enough to dedicate a stomach to storing the stinger and constantly infusing it with energy to pump out more and more venom.

The petrification effect was good at adding a certain rigidity to the neurotoxin. He did not need the petrification effect, but just making it a bit harder to move was more than fine. Just as he ended up refining away the water affinity part of the Lifeblood, so did he remove most of the earth affinity of this one.

Finally, to finish off the concoction, Jake naturally added his blood as well as some good old moss. Moss was always good in these kinds of concoctions.

It had taken many days of experimenting and many failed products. Jake did make several neurotoxins, but every time he made one, he ran into the same issue of how to deliver it properly. Making a poison that had to contact the ash itself was not feasible based on what the King had told him during his preparation phase, so Jake had gone in a direction where it simply needed to touch the Soulshape.

This meant Jake sacrificed a lot of potency for easier delivery. He also sacrificed a lot of other aspects of the poison. It did not need to deal damage; it did not need to even be particularly potent... it just had to work and be hard to deal with in a short amount of time.

Making a poison like this in only a few weeks was not easy, but Jake luckily had enough good ingredients with him to waste. What he didn't have enough of, Sandy helped him find. Finally, three days before they arrived at the mountain range, he had made the first batch of poison.

[Soul-Petrifying Shadow Poison (Rare)] – A special poison created by combining several powerful ingredients with the singular goal of creating a potent neurotoxin able to affect the soul. This is a soul poison that will actively attempt to affect any Soulshape it touches due to its nature. Once infected will make the Soulshape more rigid, severely limiting all mobility. The dark energy makes all movements of

energy more difficult for any affected target. This poison is incredibly difficult to cleanse and has a slight ability to self-replicate if not actively challenged, and it will strengthen itself the more poison is injected.

The poison looked good and had a long description, but quite frankly, it was atrocious. It was weak as hell, and Jake would prefer to use common rarity poison on his arrows over this new neurotoxin. Each dose was just so weak. However... it did its job. Because it had an element of scalability beyond any other poison he had ever made.

More importantly, it was relatively easy to make as long as he had all the ingredients. The rarity was only what it was due to the ingredients used, and the level of difficulty – or rather lack thereof – was also reflected in him having only gained two levels.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 191 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 192 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 193 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

These levels included all the batches Jake had made. He only had three leaves, but luckily each leaf had enough energy for several batches of poison each. This meant Jake had managed to create a total of fourteen batches of the poison, resulting in seventy-one bottles. He had only failed a single concoction, and that had been his third-ever attempt, once more reflecting the easy crafting difficulty.

Compared to his Sleeping Night Toxin, this poison was shameful, and he would gladly forget he had ever made it once done... but for this fight, it should be enough. If he had more time, perhaps he could have made it better, but he didn't.

One good thing, though. After this fight, he wouldn't have any more of the poison because all of it was getting used today.

With twelve hours or so to the fight, Jake began preparing. He would show that while the two Unique Lifeforms could perhaps match or even beat him in a straight-on fight, the game changed when he had preparation time.

The Ashen Phantom Devourer was about to learn why messing with an alchemist, or worse, an alchemist-hunter, was what many would classify as a very bad time.